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THE GAUNTLET
OF ALCESTE

THE GAUNTLET OF ALCESTE

By

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"Deep Furrows", etc.



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To My Friends

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

To Miss Carolyn Wells and her publishers the Author extends his best thanks for her notable volume—"The Technique of the Mystery Story"—and acknowledges that from the pages of this exhaustive and excellent study of the genre he has gleaned inspiration and a high regard for the art of mystery fiction.

—H.M.

Winnipeg, March, 1921.

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THE GAUNTLET OF ALCESTE

CHAPTER I

UNEASINESS

THE twinkle of amusement died out of Traynor's eyes as he took note of the dark circles beneath those of the beautiful, stylishly dressed girl who sat opposite him in the vineclad arbor. Foolish indeed as it seemed to him, the fact that she was frightened was undeniable. There was a telltale nervousness in Rose's manner which was beyond her power to repress completely, and although she tried to smile it was not a very successful attempt. Had she been a neurotic young woman, her present state could have been discounted at once; but the daughter of Henry C. Radcliffe was far from neurotic. Although raised to peer over the edge of Luxury's lap at the busy world about her, she was as healthy as outdoor sports could make her and possessed an ample share of that independence and poise which is the birthright of North American womanhood.

The young man hesitated, therefore, to dismiss as utter nonsense the strange things she had just finished telling him, to belittle her apprehensions as structures without other foundation than her own imagination and therefore mere folly. His very visit for the week-end

was in direct response to her frightened appeal for his advice. Yet what possible danger to her or her father could lurk about "Hillcrest", the luxurious Radcliffe home in Westchester, scarcely more than fifty minutes by motor from the corner of 42nd Street and Broadway, New York City?

"Listen, Rose. Somebody is trying to play a practical joke. There is no occasion to get excited about anything. You are within 'phone call of the finest police force on the continent and as for the supernatural—" He smiled and waved a hand eloquent of skepticism at the flowering shrubbery of the well-kept grounds, the sunny woodlands beyond which gleamed the blue waters of Long Island Sound.

"I know it must seem very silly of me," she interposed hastily, "but—Tommy, I simply can't help it. It is because everything is so vague, so mysterious and persistent and because my father has been acting so unlike himself that I feel something is wrong. If I only knew what! At least there is nothing intangible about those messages you are holding in your hand. Who sent them? And why?"

The appeal in the expressive eyes stirred him to a deep elation. It was to him Rose had turned in this trouble. Unconsciously his shoulders straightened and he frowned fiercely at the three pieces of ordinary note-paper which he still held in his hand as he allowed his mind to race in review of the events which she had just confided to him.

They were perplexing enough. Of late Rose had be-

come aware of a subtle change in her father's manner. Also he had taken a sudden liking for books dealing with psychic phenomena and seemed to be giving the subject his keenest attention. All his life Henry C. Radcliffe had been a practical business man, a money maker, and had earned a national reputation as an expert in precious stones, rare jewelry and antiques. Upon his retirement from business his chief interest in life had been his beautiful daughter, an only child whom he literally worshipped. His only other hobby had been his valuable collection of rare gems—until this new notion of reading every book he could find bearing upon phantasms of the living, phantasms of the dead, visions in the waking state and other phenomena upon which the psychic research societies were accumulating data to establish the existence of a spirit world.

Then one night Rose had heard her father pacing his room restlessly and finally she had crept to his door and overheard him conversing with someone in considerable agitation. Upon opening the door she had found him in a state of great nervousness—but alone in the room. In an awed whisper he told her that he had been talking to the spirit of her mother, long since dead. Rose had never known her mother, and upon the rare occasions that the subject had come up her father had evinced a strong dislike for it, dismissing it usually with the promise that they would go into it fully some day when she had grown up. In secret the girl had wondered greatly over this reticence. As for his present strange behavior, his firm belief that he had had a vision

—Rose was greatly alarmed. Certainly she had never known her practical, hard-headed old dad to believe in ghosts and she would have laughed at the idea but for his evident agitation. On the following morning, however, he had so far recovered his normal state that he was inclined to regard the whole thing as due to overwrought nerves and told Rose curtly to keep silence and forget the incident altogether.

Then Rose herself began to receive mysterious messages which at least had the merit of being tangible. The first had come a few days later; she found it early one morning, pinned to the pin-cushion in her boudoir with a perfectly normal and intelligent pin. Also it was written on plain notepaper—typewritten in quite an up-to-date way—and read: “Go away from Hillcrest for a visit of three or four weeks to some friend and leave before the end of the month.” It was signed in typewriting: “One Who Wishes You Well.” When the startled girl had shown it to her father his face had paled and while he had passed it off as “a foolish prank of some sort” he had been unable to hide from his daughter the fact that the incident worried him.

Exactly one week afterward the second message reached her. It was thrust into Rose’s hand as she came out of the Metropolitan one night with a party of friends in the city. The after-theatre crowd had been jostling about them while they waited for their car to pull up in response to their number, megaphoned by the uniformed starter, and she could see nobody who looked as if he were watching her. The note might have come

from any one of a hundred persons in that crowd. Its message was an echo of the first: "Do not forget to leave home for your visit before the end of the month," and it was signed as before.

The third message arrived at the end of the following week—through the mail this time. It was more imperative: "Why do you not go away? Do so at once—O.W.W.Y.W."

By this time her father had become alarmed and talked of placing the matter in the hands of the police. He urged Rose to leave home for a visit, as directed; but the idea of being dictated to in this mysterious manner by some unknown was deeply resented by the girl. She was now so worried over her father that she refused to leave him. If anyone were trying to get her out of the way in order to harm her father, she determined that they would fail.

"I think you're inclined to take the whole thing too seriously, Rose," Traynor ventured at length. "In the first place, if your father wants to study up on this psychic stuff, why shouldn't he? It is quite the popular thing just now and everybody's doing it. As for that vision of his—well, given a good imagination and a think-tank full of other people's experiences along that line, it would only require an extra large piece of cheese with one's pie to bring on an exceptionally vivid dream. In a semi-waking state one can doze through one of those dreams very realistically and merge into wakefulness with the dream still hanging around one's neck, so to speak. Frankly, I think that this is the explanation."

"But what about those three messages?" objected Rose.

"That's harder to understand," admitted Traynor slowly. "I can't see any object to be gained by the sender. If harm were intended to Mr. Radcliffe how on earth could your presence at Hillcrest prevent it? Unless— Did you show these messages to anyone besides your father?"

Only to Mrs. Stanton, who sews for us. She is a well-bred woman who has seen better days, and I have never looked upon her as a servant, rather as a motherly companion and confidante. She is refined and gentle at all times and very discreet. Knowing the matter would go no farther, I did show her the messages. I was greatly worried."

"What did she say about them?"

"She agreed with my father—that it was best for me to go. She did not think any harm would befall; it might be just a clumsy joke or a business appointment of some sort—somebody wanting to have a long and secret interview with my father at Hillcrest when none of the family were around. It was just as liable to be a blessing in disguise as anything of a harmful nature. But I felt she was just trying to quiet my fears and I decided I wouldn't budge a step."

Traynor smiled at the upturned, spunky little chin.

"Well, you didn't go and the end of the month came and nothing happened and here we are getting along into the new month—"

"You are forgetting the arrival of our two guests."

Traynor looked at her in silence. For the time being he had quite forgotten the presence of the two other guests at Hillcrest. He had been introduced to them shortly after his arrival—as he and Rose passed the tennis court where the strangers were in the middle of a lively exchange—and had promptly dismissed them from mind, his full attention being already centred upon the distractingly lovely young woman by his side.

“You mean that Mrs. Lomer Saint-Anton and her nephew with the spectacles? What a name! Is she French? Tell me about them, Rose.”

And as she did so Mr. Tommy Traynor pursed his lips and listened with a quizzical expression on his tanned and youthful face. For it appeared that Mrs. Saint-Anton had been coming to Hillcrest so frequently of late that she had worn out her welcome. As an old-time acquaintance of Henry Radcliffe she seemed to think she could come and go as a guest whenever the fancy took her. At first Rose had regarded her merely as a recurring inconvenience—one of those “friends” who barnacle themselves to every social ship and to whom one is polite without enthusiasm. Her father had requested Rose to treat Mrs. Saint-Anton with every courtesy, yet it was evident that he devoutly wished she would pack her trunk for Jericho and stay there.

“The present visitation has annoyed him particularly. I think that’s because it’s the first time she has dared to bring anybody with her. Mr. Levering is a complete stranger to us and she has no right to presume that he would be a welcome guest. Dad has no use for him and

it is astonishing the number of excuses he manages to find for disappearing for hours at a stretch and leaving the pair of them for me to endure. I—" She hesitated for an instant. "Frankly, I do not like Mr. Levering's manners."

"Why? Has he dared—?" Traynor sat up alertly.

Her smile of gentle reproof at hasty conclusions faded slowly and the look of apprehension that flitted across her face was not lost upon her companion.

"I want to be entirely fair and perhaps I should not say it," she said soberly, "but although daddy only laughed and told me not to be nonsensical when I asked him about it, I feel that for some reason he is powerless to send them away openly. The whole thing is so silly!—I don't know—Mr. Levering is almost too polite—and besides—" She stopped abruptly and the color came into her cheeks.

"Excuse me, Miss Radcliffe, but Mrs. Saint-Anton desired me to tell you that tea is served and she would be glad to have you join her."

Traynor turned to find the butler bowing deferentially. He frowned resentfully, for he strongly disliked pussy-footed servants who came and went without a little noise at least.

"Thank you, Thompson. Tell her we are coming at once."

"You were saying, Rose—?" Traynor prompted when the man had withdrawn. He noted that she was disturbed.

"Nothing much. I was merely going to add that Mrs.

Saint-Anton and Mr. Levering arrived on the thirty-first, the date mentioned in those precious messages of mine. But come, Tommy, let's have a cup of tea and be human."

CHAPTER II

MR. TRAYNOR BECOMES MORE SERIOUS

MR. TOMMY TRAYNOR was a brisk young specimen of mental and muscular activity, so completely absorbed in his work that his thoughts ran naturally in practical channels. He was what was known in business life as a "live wire", an exceptionally promising young man. Not that he lacked imagination; it was his wealth of imagination that enabled him to achieve success, and his fund of bright ideas that had graduated him logically from journalistic ranks into the advertising field. His present position as advertising manager of the famous Lamont establishment on Fifth Avenue—jewel experts and silver-smiths—kept every commercial facet of his intelligence highly polished. But even in his newspaper reporter days he had harnessed his imagination to common sense and had had scant patience with certain types of emotional women with whom he had come in contact on the trail of the day's news.

It was as a newspaper reporter that he had first met Miss Rose Radcliffe under somewhat unusual circumstances—a fire at a charity bazaar; in fact, he had rescued her—and had fallen hopelessly in love with her. But even a fifty-dollar-a-week reporter may look at a

beautiful heiress and admire her and, if he has enough nerve and ability and finds favor in her sight and is of excellent family and has cultivated a "poker face"—eventually he may look her father straight in the eye! Tommy had made wonderful progress; for with his rapidly rising income he was able to assume his proper social status and become "a desirable acquaintance." With youth calling to youth, the "friendly footing" followed quickly and in time as the mutual attraction ripened they called each other by their first names. Some day he would muster up courage to leap the barrier of wealth that frowned between them and compel her father to listen to reason.

Just now his thoughts were fully occupied with what Rose had been telling him. He did not anticipate any great trouble in getting to the bottom of the mystery and setting her mind at ease; it probably would prove to be simple enough when he had uncovered the missing link. He studied the two guests across the wicker tea-table with lively interest and decided that neither of them was cause for alarm or could have any relation whatever to the messages which Rose had received. Their arrival on the last day of the month might very well be a mere coincidence.

Although far from an ordinary woman, Mrs. Saint-Anton was the typical grand dame of the smart set, full of the inconsequential chatter of her world and capable of carrying herself with dignity and charm. In spite of her grey hair—perhaps partly because of it—she was still of striking appearance with a cold stateli-

ness that was impressive. Observing her even features, large dark eyes and finely preserved figure, Traynor could well imagine that in her time the lady had been, in the argot of the street, "some chicken." A hen of such antecedents might be forgiven charitably for a tendency to strut still! She was dressed in the height of fashion and Tommy could not help wondering if possibly Mrs. Saint-Anton was "setting her cap" for the wealthy widower who owned "Hillcrest." If that was her scheme the cap was certainly awry.

Or was it her nephew who was the fortune hunter, seeking a match with the daughter of the house? Tommy glared at him with unreasonable resentment. He was somewhat foppishly dressed and affected a blasé air and an inclination to patronize. He wore gold-rimmed glasses with thick lenses which contracted his eyes to abnormal smallness; these glasses were equipped with side lenses—blinders on a mule, thought Tommy disagreeably—so that Roger Levering's natural expression, if he had such a thing, was completely hidden. As he peered at Traynor the stare seemed to Tommy like nothing more intelligent than the vacuous gaze of a toad which stupidly watches for bugs. It only needed Levering's drawling accent to realize that in this gentleman lay infinite possibilities for boredom. His only redeeming features were his broad shoulders and the athletic suppleness of his carriage; he may have been something over forty and there was an easy grace in his movements that bespoke devotion to outdoor sports. His self-centred talk was interesting only when it veered to athletics.

Strangely enough, his present predilection appeared to be the game of chess about which he was keen to talk. He seemed greatly disappointed when he found that Traynor knew nothing about the game. Who in the mischief, thought Tommy, would want to play an indoor game like that in the golden summer time? No doubt the chump would argue that they could play it outdoors, don't you know—under the trees, as it were!

"Poor Roger has been so disappointed at finding nobody here who can play with him," Mrs. Saint-Anton murmured to Traynor in what was evidently an apology for her nephew. "He is simply chess crazy, Mr. Traynor; but I am hoping it will pass. Roger always overdoes his enthusiasms and it is fortunate that they do not last long. Just now he is getting reports from a chess instructor who is endeavoring to make a player out of him, and if I am not mistaken here comes another message for him now."

As she spoke a messenger in the regulation uniform wheeled up the driveway, looking hot and dusty. Levering had risen eagerly and presently waved the message in front of them, excusing himself in order that he might consult his chess board. Traynor caught a glimpse of a jumble of chess notations and as Levering disappeared, taking the messenger with him, Tommy decided that he could stay with the chess-board till dinner time for all he would be missed. Which is exactly what Levering did.

In trying to analyse his dislike for Roger Levering it did not take Traynor long to reach the conclusion that

nine-tenths of it was due to his own prejudice and he was forced to smile at his momentary jealousy. If "poor Roger" was guilty of "intentions" he was certainly starting off on the wrong foot in antagonizing his host.

Immediately after dinner Henry Radcliffe carried Tommy off to the library for one of their customary talks over the cigars. He liked to talk to this young advertising manager of Lamont's, finding in him a listener who was intelligent enough to allow the elder man to do most of the talking and who had a keen appreciation of his host's favorite subject—rare gems. How many of Tommy Traynor's invitations to Hillcrest were due to his listening accomplishments it would have been hard to estimate. What Henry C. Radcliffe would have said had he known that the mendacious Tommy was trying deliberately "to make a hit with the old boy" at these interviews for the ulterior purpose of robbing him eventually of his most precious possession—! But Mr. Traynor took good care that her father did not know and Henry Radcliffe liked him immensely.

The tired lines which Tommy had noted in his host's face at the dinner table vanished in animation, once they were alone in the library, and as he chatted away there was no sign whatever of those inward forebodings which Rose had recounted a few hours before. But for the incident which followed there might have been no sign at all of the strain under which Henry Radcliffe was living.

Opening the library safe, he had taken out two large oblong cases of black velvet and handed them to Tommy with the pleased air of a small boy who proudly ex-

hibits a new jackknife. One of the cases contained a diamond necklace of remarkable beauty; the other a wonderful collar of pearls. Traynor drew in his breath at the dazzling display. He knew something of precious stones and the evident value of these startled him. He was about to remark on the danger of keeping them at "Hillcrest" when Roger Levering walked into the room with a large book under his arm.

"Oh, really—I beg your pardon! I—did not know the library was occupied," he stammered and withdrew in haste after laying the volume on the nearest bookcase.

Traynor hardly noticed the interruption, it was so fleeting; but the scowl remained on Radcliffe's face. Then as Tommy was admiring the lustre of the perfect pearls, twelve rows deep, the butler entered.

"Did you ring, sir?" he asked, civilly enough.

Traynor hastily closed the case of pearls and slipped it out of sight beneath the newspapers on the library table. Henry Radcliffe's face was furious as he turned on the man and angrily told him to get out. Tommy picked up the second case containing the diamonds and closed it nervously.

"I'll take that, Traynor." He literally threw it into the safe and slammed the door with a clang, muttering something about a man being unable to call his house his own these days. "You will have to excuse me, my boy; but let us defer this display until another time. I am feeling out of sorts to-night. To-morrow we'll have a long talk where we will not be interrupted. I think I will retire early, if you don't mind."

Tommy's face was thoughtful as he walked slowly out and bent his steps towards the pergola in search of Rose. That Henry Radcliffe's nerves were taut, almost to the breaking point, he no longer doubted. Of course, it was provoking to be interrupted with those jewels of great value open to observation; but the only way to ensure secrecy would have been to lock the library doors. The library was a room that was usually open to all members of the household and Traynor could not help feeling sorry for Levering whose embarrassment under the reproof of his host's frown had been painfully apparent. It was likely the butler would be sufficiently thick-skinned after years of service, to stand anything; but for a host to treat a guest, unwelcome though he might be, with anything but courtesy—well, it was sufficiently foreign to Henry Radcliffe as Tommy knew him to illustrate the change which had come over him. His show of temper and sudden termination even of Tommy's company seemed out of proportion to the cause. .

“‘Out of sorts’ is right,” nodded Traynor. Then he caught sight of Rose's welcoming smile and promptly forgot everything else for the time being.

The evening passed very pleasantly, featured by a stroll about the grounds with the girl who had come to mean so much to him. Afterwards they all had quite an enjoyable game of billiards at which Levering was very proficient. They left him finally amusing himself with practice shots and presently the ladies excused themselves for the night.

"Mr. Traynor, please. You are wanted on the telephone, sir."

The butler showed him the location of the instrument in the hall and with some surprise Traynor listened to the voice on the wire. It sounded muffled and indistinct but he thought it must be Baker, Lamont's private secretary. The man rang off, however, as soon as he had delivered his message and left Tommy somewhat irritated that he had done so.

He was annoyed, too, at the message itself. Mr. Lamont was requesting him to return to the city by the first train in the morning for an hour's conference on a matter of immediate importance. He was sorry to intrude, but it was important. He would be free to return to Hillcrest in the afternoon, however.

Darn the luck! But business was business. Anyway, he could be back by six in the evening at latest, possibly much earlier; so it might be worse. He thought Lamont was going out of town for the week-end; but apparently his chief had changed his mind.

He retired to his rooms. A comfortable armchair, drawn up to the open window, appealed to him and he proceeded to fill his pipe. He did not feel sleepy yet and a quiet review of things before turning in was in order. He must decide just how best to act to arrive at some satisfactory explanation of those messages which were worrying Rose.

Traynor was more disturbed than he cared to have her know, and with the coming of night the situation had begun to appear more complex than he had at first

imagined. Undoubtedly something was wrong at Hillcrest—with Henry Radcliffe. And a man of his experience and initiative did not lose grip on himself without cause. That fear of Rose's that some menace to her father might be creeping in upon them seemed less foolish, sitting here in the dark and gazing out into the moonlit night, than in afternoon's sunlight. Plenty of men found secrets of their past refusing to stay buried in oblivion — particularly when they had grown as wealthy as Henry C. Radcliffe. Traynor stirred with irritation at this line of speculation which threatened possibilities that were bounded only by the elasticity of his imagination. He must stick to the facts or he would get nowhere.

He got up and for a moment leaned out over the window-sill, breathing deeply of the cool flower-perfumed air. It was a night of piling cloud movement and the changing lights and shadows checkered the woodlands. His room was next to that of his host, on the side of the house where an elaborate fire-escape had been installed; the long platform of it ran beneath the window of the guest room which Traynor was occupying, and also beneath the adjoining windows, descending finally to within ten feet of the ground directly above the driveway.

One by one the lights disappeared from the upper chambers of the graystone mansion, but even after the last light in the servants' wing had gone out, Tommy Traynor still sat on in the darkness, smoking and thinking. At last he began to undress in the dark and had just climbed into bed when he paused at sound of a

knock on Henry Radcliffe's door and soon the murmur of conversation reached him. The voices were indistinct at first and the persistent mumble prevented him dropping off to sleep immediately as was his habit. Presently the sound grew louder and a snatch of excited conversation reached his ears.

"Well, out with it!" came Radcliffe's irritated accents. "What do you want now?"

A woman's voice murmured on for a space, then rose in a passion.

"I tell you, you must do it. You must!"

Traynor heard the door close at last. Silence ensued. He wondered sleepily what Rose could be discussing with her father at that hour. Well, that at least was none of his business. No 'casion—make mystery out of—molehill. He'd soon clear everything up—to-morrow. To-morrow—

He fell asleep.

What it was awakened him Traynor could not say. What time it was he did not know. He started up in bed and looked around him dazedly. It took him a moment to get his bearings.

The moonlight was streaming in through the latticed window of his room. It fell to the rug in a patch of silver. As he stared blinkingly at that patch of light he noted a shadow stealing slowly across it. A cloud, of course—No! His gaze lifted quickly to the window. Perspiration came out on his forehead.

A hideous, grinning face was peering in at him—a face—a half of a face, white in the moonlight!

CHAPTER III

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT

TRAYNOR was no coward, but it took him a few moments to collect his wits. The face had been withdrawn instantly and Tommy sprang from the bed and threw wide the French window. Nobody was there. He went out onto the fire-escape in his pyjamas and even walked to the end of the runway and looked down. The moon had gone under an extra large cloud and the light was not of the best; but his eyes had become more or less accustomed to it. Not a motion was discernable as his swift gaze swept the shrubbery and lawns. Nobody was anywhere in sight and although he listened intently there was no sound except the whisper of the leaves in the faint night breeze.

"That's darned funny!" he grumbled to himself.

Shivering, he crept back to his room and nestled in beneath the covers, his mind swimming. He was sure that he had not been mistaken; but he must have been. It was the only solution; he must have been half dreaming. He felt beneath his pillow for his watch; the hands pointed to 1.55.

Then he held his breath to listen. Somebody was tapping cautiously at Henry Radcliffe's door. Tommy

could hear no response; no doubt the sleeper had not awakened. The silence within the house was so heavy that every sound was magnified. He distinctly heard a rustling of garments out in the hall and a moment later a similar sound seemed to come from within the room next to his own. A queer scratching followed. Then Traynor's heart stood still at a smothered cry of terror.

Springing from bed, he switched on the light and grabbed up his dressing-gown. He snapped off the light again and peered cautiously out into the upper hallway just in time to catch sight of a hurrying figure at the head of the staircase. The woman's hair hung about her shoulders in a billowy mass and as she disappeared quickly down the stairs Traynor followed without hesitation as far as the staircase. He hung back until she entered the library.

Instantly he was in motion, slipping noiselessly down the heavily padded stairs and hiding for a moment or two behind a curtain in the lower hall. But as she had closed the door after her and did not reappear at once, Traynor decided to risk discovery for a peek through the keyhole, a procedure which he felt justified in taking by virtue of the circumstances.

He saw the woman kneeling in front of the large safe, her hand on the handle as if she had just closed the door. Her back was toward him and it was not until she straightened up and turned that he got a look at her face. It was Rose Radcliffe!

She came out so quickly that Traynor barely had time

to get behind the curtains alongside the door. A rustle of her silk kimona, a whiff of subtle perfume and she had brushed past him. She seemed in a great hurry and as she glanced over her shoulder apprehensively his heartbeats quickened in fear that she had seen him. But she hurried to the staircase and ran all the way up. He listened until he heard the door of her room close before he ventured to move.

Greatly bewildered, Tommy stole back to his own room on tip-toe. He crawled slowly into bed where he lay thinking for a long time in an effort to understand what he had just seen. What was Rose doing in the library at that time of night? Why this nocturnal secrecy? Above all, why was she clutching to her breast a large oblong jewel-case of black velvet? There was no mistaking it. He had seen it and recognized it at once as one of those her father had shown him after dinner with such pride.

He decided that as soon as he got back from town the following afternoon he would have a talk with Rose, tell her exactly what he had observed and ask her to be frank with him. It was the only way that he could hope to be of use to her in the troubles which seemed to be hedging her about.

He shut his eyes, but he was not to be permitted to sleep just yet. Even as he settled himself once more for slumber a new sound brought him again to elbow prop. The sound was distinct to his alert senses. Someone with the utmost stealth was creeping down the hall past his room!

Breathlessly Traynor listened. The blood throbbed in his ears. Then after a moment he slipped quietly out of bed for the third time, wrapped the ends of his pyjama legs about each ankle in turn and drew his socks over them; next his trousers and the dressing-gown and his rubber-soled tennis shoes. Then he carefully opened his bedroom door, determined this time to explore the house till he found out what was going on under that roof during the hours when its inmates were supposed to be wrapped in sleep.

The night light which had been burning dimly at the end of the hall had been turned out by somebody. The place was in darkness except for a lone shaft of moonlight that filtered through the small cut-glass panes at the top of the long stained-glass window of the stairway landing. The occasional whispering of the leaves outside as they held converse with the night zephyrs penetrated at intervals the dead silence that hung like a pall in that high, arched hallway. As he advanced slowly in the dark Traynor's feet made no sound. He paused. A door closed somewhere on the floor above him, and presently a breath of cold air reached his face like the passing touch of unseen fingers.

Then he saw it. In perplexity he stood still—perplexity that altered slowly to pure astonishment. At first it was but a pale blur, high in the darkness that enveloped the upper reaches of the stair that ascended to the floor above; but it grew in luminosity as he watched, and he became aware that the dim smudge in the dark was floating steadily towards him as if wafting down the

stairway on unseen feet. There was no sound whatever except the pounding of his own blood in his own ears.

Clutching the carved supports of the bannister rail, Traynor crouched, straining his eyes in the dark, wondering what it was that he saw. It took form slowly as it approached—then the thing flitted across the landing where fell the refracted rays of the moon that filtered in through the cut-glass panes. The moon went under a cloud and he had only a glimpse; but in spite of himself he felt his spine prickling.

Although Mr. Thomas Traynor did not believe in ghostly manifestations, he could not prevent his mind flashing back to everything that Rose had told him about her father's strange conviction that he had been conversing with the spirit of a dead woman. And the figure of the apparition was that of a woman. But it had no face! It was dressed in gray habiliments that trailed and floated about it like figments of vapor. The torso was wound round and round with this substance. The trunk had no arms and in place of a head the diaphanous wrappings curled upward to a peak. The upper part of the figure seemed to exude a faint glowing light; the lower part— There was no lower part! The mystified onlooker knew that the wrappings reminded him of something which at first eluded his memory. Then he had it—a picture he had seen one time—of Lazarus coming forth from the tomb, still wrapped in cere cloths!

Scarcely believing the evidence of his senses, the fas-

minated young man stared after the vision as it floated onward and downward in the blackness. For a space his limbs seemed paralyzed and he could not move in his sheer amazement. Then his mind righted itself and he started forward. The figure now was on the floor below, moving swiftly and silently towards the rear hall. As fast as he could go without noise Traynor went down the stairs in pursuit.

The thing was not in sight when he gained the ground floor; but without hesitation he turned to the left and sped through an archway into the rear hall that led towards the kitchens. At the end of the passage he got just a glimpse of the Gray Woman vanishing through an open doorway and ran swiftly in that direction. A basement entry stood open and presently he found himself outside the house, running through the shrubbery.

He stopped short at a rustle of leaves near him. The next instant he was knocked flat on his face.

His assailant fought furiously. Although Traynor exerted every effort to dislodge him and tried every wrestling trick he knew, the man was too strong for him. Certainly there was nothing intangible about this fellow's muscles; for soon Tommy found himself thrown on his back and pinned helpless to the earth with the hot, angry breath of his antagonist blowing in his ear.

"Now, damn you, we'll have a look at you!" growled a voice.

There came a slight click and the glow of an electric torch fell full on Traynor's face, blinding him. The

result was rather surprising, for at once the man released him and sprang back in evident astonishment.

"Traynor!" he muttered. "You! "Wh-what's this mean?"

It was Roger Levering—a dumfounded Roger Levering with his pyjamas showing under his coat and in his stocking feet. As Traynor stared back at his dishevelled fellow guest he was no less amazed. But the meaning of it was too apparent to them both to waste time.

"Which way did it go? Quick, man!" cried Tommy in an excited whisper.

"Oh, my word! I don't know. I don't know. You—you saw it, too—that white thing? I—I thought you—"

With impatience Traynor brushed him aside and ran for the gate in the wall at the foot of the garden. As he expected, it was unbolted. Levering came panting behind him; but although they both explored the hedges and shrubbery, and after that the highway outside the grounds, the thing they were pursuing had vanished as if drawn into the night sky by some invisible power and lost among the clouds that marched there in silent majesty.

It was then Traynor realized that Roger Levering was shaking with chill—or fear—or both. The man had received a bad fright if his face was any barometer. It was like chalk and drops of moisture covered his forehead. Traynor eyed him, surprised that one of his muscular vigor should become such a coward of his imagination at the first hint of the supernatural.

"I say, do—do you think it was a spook?" asked

Levering in an awed whisper. 'The hand with which he clutched the other's arm was quivering. "Do you believe in spirits—and all that sort of r-rot?"

Tommy, on the point of casting off the trembling grip with an impatient denial, paused.

"Sometimes," was what he said.

Levering's teeth chattered like castenets.

"I once—knew a—chap—"

"Speaking of spirits, Levering, how about a scoot of Scotch? You look as if you needed a drink. We'll catch cold if we stand here," he said practically. "Let's beat it for the dining-room."

The suggestion was approved instantly by Levering. When they had turned on the light he almost ran to the sideboard; but the decanter shook so badly that Tommy took it from him and poured out a stiff drink of whiskey. Levering swallowed it at a gulp and immediately held out the glass for a second one.

"What's that mark on your finger?" asked Traynor curiously. As he peered more closely he saw that it was a purple stain as from an indelible pencil—or ink.

"I was writing a letter in my room—not sleeping well, you know; so I got up to do it. Was right in the middle of it when I heard suspicious sounds and came out into the hall to investigate. Then I saw that bally ghost thing and popped back into my room, quite upset — knocked over the ink, you know—quite a turn, I assure you. But I got back courage to come out again and when I could see nothing of it I went on downstairs. Got as far as the lower hall when I heard a slight noise up

above again and there the damned thing was again—coming right down after me. I ran ahead of it and when I saw it was making for outdoors I slipped out and lay for it. I heard you in the bushes and jumped right on you—for which accept my apologies, Traynor, like a good fellow.”

“Some jumper!” grinned Tommy, rubbing his arm which was still aching. “It was you I heard, then, creeping past my door.” In the explanation of his own movements he left out all mention of Rose Radcliffe, of course.

“Dash it, old boy, I’m going to get beneath the blankets,” decided Levering abruptly. He was still looking pale and unwell. He took one more drink and promised to say nothing of what they had seen. There was no need to alarm the ladies unnecessarily, argued Tommy.

“Right-o. If I’d known the dashed house was haunted, I’d never have set foot in it,” murmured Levering with a shudder. “The bally thing was whimpering and moaning when it went past me—whimpering and moaning, Traynor. It’s God’s truth!”

His starey little eyes behind their thick lenses turned upon Tommy with such solemnity that Traynor slapped him on the back with a word of encouragement as he switched off the light. Arm in arm, they went upstairs.

“There’s nothing to get scared about, Levering. Go to bed and forget it. Good-night.”

“Nothing to get scared about,” echoed Levering in a husky whisper. “No, nothing to get scared about.” And as he went on down the hall to his room he seemed to be repeating to himself this comforting phrase.

CHAPTER IV

CONSTERNATION

NOBODY, meeting Roger Levering in the breakfast-room that morning, could have found fault with his appearance or questioned the peace of his night's repose. Under the invigorating influence of a cold bath and a brisk walk before the dew was off the grass, all traces of his disturbing experience had vanished. He looked immaculate—even more so than usual—in his smart riding breeches and leather gaiters; with his snow-white stock at the neck and a clean shave, Levering was a very presentable gentleman and, but for the displeasing effect of the thick lenses of his glasses, might have been considered handsome.

The breakfast-room was bright with sunshine; the morning-glory vines at the windows nodded their funnels of color in welcome of it and approval of the songs the birds were singing. No thought of gray apparitions, whimpering and moaning in the dead of the night, could live in that setting and as he stood at an open window, chest inflated, there was a self-reliant poise in the well-dressed athletic figure that bespoke a much-travelled cosmopolitan who was entirely sure of himself.

Pausing in the doorway, Rose Radcliffe envied him his poise. She was conscious that her own appearance this

morning was not as fresh as it might be; but she was not quite prepared for comment upon it from Mr. Levering.

"Good-morning, Miss Radcliffe," he greeted urbanely with an easy bow. "I hope that you rested well; but I am afraid the hope is not borne out by the facts, if you will pardon my saying so." He interrogated with his eyebrows and smiled. "But I guess you are not the only one; I happened to overhear my estimable aunt complaining to the maid of a bad night as I passed her door. And your father seems to be oversleeping." He held out his watch and she noted that breakfast was later than usual. "We were to go for a canter this morning and planned an early start. Pity to waste such a glorious day as this."

"I saw the valet knocking at my father's door as I came downstairs and I have no doubt he will join us soon," said the girl somewhat coldly. She turned to greet Mrs. Saint-Anton who swept into the room with vivacity.

"Dear me! I thought I would be the last one in," she smiled.

"Oh, it is quite all right," assured Rose, noting with her woman's eye for such things that the rouge on her guest's cheeks had been applied with less delicacy than usual. "Neither daddy nor Mr. Traynor—"

"Miss Radcliffe! Your p-pardon, p-please—but I—"

They all gazed at the agitated servant who stood in the archway. It was Follis, her father's man, leaning weakly against the woodwork, white and shaken.

"Why, Follis!" Rose cried, starting forward in alarm. "Are you ill? What—? Speak out. What is the matter with you?"

But as she asked it she seemed to sense the answer and shrank from it involuntarily, the valet's horror reflected in her own eyes.

"Your father, Miss— lyin' on his bedroom floor when I opens the door—dead!"

Rose swayed unsteadily and Mrs. Saint-Anton stepped quickly towards her. Levering strode forward uncertainly, stopped and stared at the valet, his face the picture of shocked disbelief.

"Do you know what you are saying?" he almost shouted.

"It is true, sir. Mr. Radcliffe has been shot to death—murdered, sir—during the night!"

At this terrible news all three seemed paralyzed for the moment. Then with a bound Levering was out of the room, and going upstairs, three steps at a time, followed by the valet. Thompson, the butler, on his way to the library, turned to watch them, his bland expression of surprise giving way to sudden excitement. He, too, rushed up the stairs.

With a quick cry, Rose broke away from the older woman's restraining hand and made wildly for the staircase, Mrs. Saint-Anton close behind her. But Levering met them at the door of Henry Radcliffe's room, his arm extended to stop their entry.

"Ladies—please—it is no place for you—"

Rose pushed past him and gave a quick gasp at sight

of her father's huddled form on the floor. She would have advanced farther into the room but for Levering who gently but firmly barred the way.

"Nothing must be touched, Miss Radcliffe," he warned imperatively, "until the police arrive. Thompson, 'phone for them at once."

"The police!" cried Mrs. Saint-Anton in consternation. She shaded her eyes with her hand. "Horrible! How horrible!" she murmured to herself.

A torrent of questions broke from Rose Radcliffe's lips. Her agitation was pitiful. She tried once more to get into the room. But Roger Levering was firm and signalled Mrs. Saint-Anton to take charge of the distracted girl who suddenly bowed her head on the supporting shoulder and suffered herself to be led slowly to her room where she threw herself, sobbing, upon the bed.

Slowly shaking his head, Levering locked the door and thrust the key into his pocket. The awed faces of the servants peered into the hallway from the rear quarters as he came thoughtfully downstairs. Then he turned upon Follis with a startled expression.

"Where is Mr. Traynor?" he demanded.

"I understand he left this morning, sir—on the early train."

"What? Left Hillcrest altogether?" His face showed surprise. Rapidly he questioned the man; but the valet could give him no information as to the purpose of the sudden departure or the young man's destination and,

recalling the night's encounter, it was excusable that Levering's manner betrayed a hint of suspicion.

He was given no time to question further; for Thompson, who had rushed back down to the library, now came running out into the hall, his complacency completely shattered.

"There's been a robbery, too!" he called out, forgetting all formalities in his excitement. "The safe in there—wide open!—empty!"

Levering ran to the library door and looked in. It was as the butler had said. A few scattered papers alone were visible in addition to the little metal deposit-box which his aunt had handed to her host for safe-keeping; it did not appear to have been tampered with. It contained only her personal papers—deeds and so on.

Rising from his examination, Levering stood looking down in silence for a moment. He grunted "Hmph!" once or twice while a little mirthless smile played about his cynical lips. Then the lines grew grim in his face.

"Nothing is to be touched—nothing whatever, Thompson. You are sure you understand?"

"Very good, sir."

"You 'phoned the police station?"

"They are sending someone at once, sir."

"Is Mr. Traynor the only member of this household to be—missing—this morning, Thompson?"

"I believe so, sir."

"It is very awkward—very awkward indeed. That will do, Thompson."

CHAPTER V

THE POLICE TAKE CHARGE

WITHIN two hours of the 'phone call Lieutenant Robert Fargey, of the detective bureau, was on the scene, accompanied by the coroner. It was the second jewel robbery of importance reported within the week and the instructions that had reached the precinct captain of detectives had been explicit. Lieutenant Fargey had been taken off desk duty in order to handle the case in person with every resource of the bureau and the Central Office at his back; for the murder of such a prominent citizen as Henry C. Radcliffe was a complication indeed.

Fargey was one of the keenest plainclothes men on the force. Of medium build physically, there was nothing very striking about his appearance unless it was the fastidious neatness with which he dressed. His manner was gruff, his movements energetic. There were those who did not like his ways, particularly his sarcasms of speech and his inordinate vanity; but as a detective he was undoubtedly a man of great ability. If he was a lover of publicity for what it could earn him by way of promotion, he never let it interfere with the thoroughness of his investigations. With the newspaper reporters, of course, he was perhaps the most popular

man at the bureau; for he made it a point to tip them off on the news whenever possible and many a favorable mention in the columns of the New York press was due to this—and a certain largess in cigars.

The brisk assurance with which he took charge of the present case, once he reached "Hillcrest", showed that he knew his business. While Hays, his subordinate, at a nod, rang the doorbell he stood back and took a swift survey of the surroundings. As the butler opened the big door with its plate glass protected by grill work of intricate design, he stepped forward, brusquely introducing himself, and without waiting to be invited, walked right in.

"Where's Miss Radcliffe?"

The butler indicated the drawing-room and Fargey entered. He threw the briefest of glances at the elder woman and introduced himself at once to the younger.

"Sorry to worry you at a time like this, Miss Radcliffe, but it is my duty. Please have everybody who went to bed in this house last night brought here—including the servants."

Rose nodded to Thompson and the butler bowed and withdrew. The servants filed in presently—eight of them besides the butler—Rose's maid, the housemaid, and the valet, the cook and the scullery maid, the laundress, the gardener and the chauffeur. They stood awkwardly in line, self-conscious and ill at ease.

"Is Mrs. Stanton—? Oh, here she comes now," murmured Rose as the seamstress came slowly into the room.

Fargey cyed her sharply; but in that gentle face with

its aureole of snow-white hair and its marks of refinement was a wistful sadness that commanded sympathy.

"There is nothing unusual in this, madam—just a necessary formality," explained Fargey as he noted her nervousness. "We will not detain you long." He turned to Detective-Sergeant Hayes. "Run over them, Sergeant, in the presence of Miss Radcliffe and give them to understand that they are not to move out of the house, use the telephone or write until given permission."

Rose had introduced him to the two guests while they were awaiting the arrival of the servants and Fargey now turned to Roger Levering.

"I will ask you, sir, to show us the room where it happened. I would like to ask some questions, Miss Radcliffe, after I come down." He bowed in acknowledgement of her acquiescence and followed Levering from the room.

"Who first discovered the body?" he demanded as they went upstairs.

"Follis, Mr. Radcliffe's valet."

"Anybody been in the room since?"

"Only in the doorway," replied Levering. "I thought it best to lock the place up until you arrived."

"Quite right," grunted Fargey, covertly eyeing the other more closely as he turned the key and threw open the door.

For a moment Fargey stood on the threshold, surveying the sitting-room with its fireplace and mantel. Across the room was a wide alcove at the back of which a huge cherrywood wardrobe was built in, extending

almost to the ceiling. Through an archway was visible the bedroom beyond. Through the sitting-room window the iron railing of the fire-escape showed.

These details Lieutenant Fargey's busy eyes took in at a sweeping glance before coming to focus upon the body of Henry Radcliffe which lay in a huddled heap in front of the fireplace. The rich, brocaded lounging-robe and slippers, an open book inverted upon the small library table beside the reading lamp—these were eloquent of the fact that Henry Radcliffe had been sitting quietly in his room, reading. The bed had not been slept in.

Fargey stooped quickly and picked up a small S. & W. revolver that lay a few feet beyond the outstretched arm. He examined it for a moment, noting that it was fully charged, then dropped it into his pocket without comment. He knelt on one knee and studied the body more closely. In the fingers of the right hand was clutched a gold pencil of the sort that is worn by ladies upon a chain. Fargey reached over and secured it; a bit of chain dangled from the ring in the end of it.

"This looks important—assailant evidently a woman—been a struggle an' this got torn off, eh? All right, Doc." He waved the coroner towards the body and rose to examine the room in detail. While he poked about the coroner proceeded to ascertain the cause of death.

A sharp ejaculation from Roger Levering drew the eyes of both men towards him. He had been standing in the background, an interested observer, but saying nothing. As they looked at him now they saw that his face was pale and that he was pointing excitedly towards

the body which Dr. Charles had just turned over. The left arm which had been doubled underneath was now visible and it was to this that Levering's finger directed attention.

"What's that?" cried Fargey, striding briskly across the room.

"The shirt-cuff!" repeated Levering. "See, it's been torn off! The cuff's—gone!"

"Gone!" echoed the detective. He stared blankly, not at the torn sleeve but at Roger Levering. A muttered imprecation escaped him as he confirmed the fact that the left cuff of the white shirt was indeed missing—ripped completely off, leaving a frayed sleeve. The starched linen cuff was intact on the right sleeve which at first alone had been visible.

"Don't—don't you understand? Somebody's taken it!"

"How deucedly clever of you, Mr. Levering!" There was almost a sneer upon Fargey's face as he eyed the other suspiciously. "When a thing's missing, of course somebody took it. Now, who was it? And why did they take that cuff?"

"I'm sure I can't say," faltered Roger Levering. "The door's been locked."

"Since breakfast," snapped Fargey irritably, and the coroner looked at him in mild surprise. "What's the verdict, Doc?"

"Shot through the lung—dead over twelve hours, I would say. Here is the bullet—automatic, .25 caliber, fired at comparatively close range."

"Could he have lived long enough to write a message

on his shirt-cuff?" The detective looked at him eagerly.

"I believe so—a few minutes possibly."

"That's what he did—and somebody interested in that message discovered it—removed it."

Fargey was on his feet now, making systematic search of the room, every corner of it. He went on into the bedroom and searched there without success."

"Did you find the shirt-cuff?" asked Levering, as the detective returned to the sitting-room.

"Didn't expect to," grunted Fargey. "Through, Doc?"

He locked the door after him and they all went downstairs. In the drawing-room Hayes had finished his questioning of the servants and his superior waved them back to their own quarters peremptorily. But he halted them at the door for a moment.

"Did anyone hear a shot fired during the night? Think now—all of you."

Nobody had heard any such sound. The detective considered this strange fact for a moment, then waved the servants out.

"You are sure, Miss Radcliffe, that I have seen everyone—?"

"There was one other guest who was recalled to the city early this morning—Mr. Thomas Traynor," replied Rose. "He left word for me that he had received a message from his employer unexpectedly that required his presence in the city this forenoon. He expects to return by six o'clock."

"Expectations are no good in a case as serious as this, Miss Radcliffe. Who is his employer, please?"

"Armaund Lamont — the Fifth Avenue jeweler."

"Phone headquarters, Hayes, to look him up. If he did not see Lamont, have them locate him and report. I would like to know, Miss Radcliffe, who occupied the rooms adjoining those of your father last night."

"Mr. Traynor was in the room on the left side and Mrs. Saint-Anton on the right."

"May I see those rooms please?"

"You poor child!" murmured Mrs. Saint-Anton as soon as they were alone. "What a disagreeable man! Your American policemen—" She rolled her eyes upward and raised her hands in a gesture more expressive than words.

"He is only doing his duty," defended Rose, wondering somewhat at the feeling of resentment which possessed her. Mrs. Saint-Anton had been kindness itself in her ministrations of the trying hours just passed; yet the girl found herself wishing both these strangers in the house would go away and leave her alone. Her poor father had felt the same way. "From what I have seen I am inclined to believe that Lieutenant Fargey is a thoroughly reliable and efficient officer and will find out who killed my father. That is what he is here for and that is what we all want him to do, is it not?"

"Oh, my dear Rose, how can you ask it? By all means! Oh, it is terrible, terrible—and so inconvenient. Roger and I had planned to run down to Atlantic City on Tuesday; the Van Alstyne's are expecting us. But I suppose this policeman—you might ask him, my dear, how soon we shall be allowed to leave. Of course—if

you prefer me to remain with you—if I can be of any service—”

“There is nothing you can do, Mrs. Saint-Anton, and I really would prefer to be alone at this time—” Rose began frankly.

“Quite so. I understand. Yes, of course,” murmured the elder woman, and while she tried to throw only sympathy into her tones there was a false note in it that did not escape the girl’s sensitive ear.

“But I am afraid nobody will be allowed to leave here—until after the fullest investigation has been made by the police.”

Neither of them said anything more upon the subject and before long Fargey returned, followed by Roger Levering.

“We are going into the library now, Miss Radcliffe. Will you please attend—you, too, madam.”

Except for the open door of the safe the room was in perfect order. Fargey approached the safe, but made no attempt to touch it.

“Was your father in the habit of keeping valuable gems in—that?” he demanded incredulously.

“Oh, no—not usually,” Rose replied. “His collection is in his safety vault—at the bank. But occasionally he brought some of the jewels home for short periods and when he did, that was where he kept them.”

“Know what was in the safe last night? Any inventory of the contents or anything like that?”

Rose hesitated, then shook her head. Lieutenant Fargey frowned thoughtfully, his lips pursed in disapproval.

"Can you describe your father's actions last night, Miss Radcliffe?—what he did during the evening, I mean—who was with him last, and so on?"

"Immediately after dinner he came into the library to smoke a cigar with Mr. Traynor as usual—"

"As usual?" She colored under the detectives's shrewd look.

"Mr. Traynor is quite often our guest. Father liked to talk to him about—" She hesitated.

"Yes? About his collection of jewels?"

"Yes."

"So last night they were in this room, discussing precious stones—perhaps looking at some of them?"

"Excuse me, but I can verify that," Levering vouchsafed. "By accident, I came upon them in here, not knowing the room was being used for an interview. Afterwards Traynor and the rest of us played billiards, Mr. Radcliffe having complained of a headache and the desire to retire early for a good night's rest."

"You saw them—examining jewels?"

Levering hesitated.

"Remember, I was intruding. Yes, they were looking at some cases of gems. I was in the room but a moment. But surely you do not think—?"

"Never mind what I think!" snapped Fargey. "That will be all for the present. I am returning to town with the coroner, Miss Radcliffe, but I will be back some time in the afternoon. Meanwhile Sergeant Hayes will be in charge here and we will appreciate it if you will afford him every opportunity in his further investigations about

the house and grounds. I must request that all of you remain on the premises. No communications of any sort can be allowed for the present except through Sergeant Hayes."

"Mrs. Saint-Anton was wondering whether she and Mr. Levering could leave—"

"Decidedly not!" cried Fargey, flashing both of the guests a quick look of anger. "I do not want to be forced to take harsh measures, Miss Radcliffe; but it must be understood that until permission is granted, nobody is to leave this house. Have I your word on that point—all of you?" He grunted as each one nodded in turn. "You will be required to give evidence at the inquest. After that—we'll know more than we do at present."

Dr. Charles, the coroner, was already waiting in the car under the porte-cochère and Fargey, climbing in, paused to give final instructions to his subordinate.

"Keep a sharp lookout, Sergeant. And comb house and grounds for a cuff torn from a white shirt. Not that I expect you to find it; but look anyway—an' look good."

His face relaxed as he sank back on the cushions. He seemed very tired.

"You did not get much sleep last night, old man," ventured the doctor. "Better ease up a bit. You are working too hard, Bob."

Lieutenant Fargey glanced at him sharply. Then he laughed.

"Ease up? That's a good one. Do you know, Doc,

that this is the second big jewel robbery this week! And now it's murder as well and a man as prominent as Radcliffe—!" He broke off impatiently. "They've put it up to me an' I've kissed sleep a fond farewell for a while—till I run down the gang. It was four o'clock when I turned in last night."

CHAPTER VI

MR. ADDISON KENT

IN his comfortable suite of rooms in Minaki Annex, Mr. Addison Kent, the well-known author of popular detective stories, had just finished a late breakfast and the latest extra. It was nearly eleven o'clock; but the ordinary divisions of night and day meant little to Addison Kent when he was at work and daylight had been blue at his windows when he had put the last finishing touch to his new novel with a sigh of relief. Once in the grip of those mad fits of literary production that periodically swept him away upon the high seas of his imagination, Addison Kent preferred to divide the clock according to demands of circumstance, scattering the hours to suit his own convenience. Thus, breakfast at three in the afternoon or dinner at three in the morning were matters entirely ungoverned by the complexion of the sky.

To find suitable quarters and to make household arrangements that fitted his special needs had required a lengthy search. Minaki Court on its quiet street off Riverside Drive had been a discovery; the location of the Annex with a frontage of its own on the little boulevarded crescent at the rear had further aroused his interest; it was really the old house originally on the pro-

perty, converted into five-room suites, two on each floor, and the minute he had stepped inside that top-floor suite he knew that his search was over. Then had come the biggest discovery of all—the elderly Mrs. Madden across the hall, retired housekeeper, author of delightful pies and cakes, dramatist of the oven, creator of the famous Madden salads and master of all the culinary arts. It had required some coaxing; but the good woman was naturally a motherly sort and there was no resisting this attractive young man. Not only had she agreed to look after his rooms for him, but as she became better acquainted with him and his work she found many other ways of making herself useful, answering the telephone when he was out and guarding him against aggravating interruptions.

But it was not of his fortunate accommodations which Kent was thinking as he lolled in a worn old Morris chair by the window this morning, puffing thoughtfully at his favorite briar pipe. Sunday was always a lazy day with him; but he would have been out in the sunshine somewhere except for the glaring headlines of the latest murder sensation that stared at him from the front page of the latest extra, just delivered from the little news-stand where he kept a monthly account for the service. In itself the murder of Henry C. Radcliffe at his Westchester home was sufficiently startling; but to Kent it carried special interest by reason of the fact that Mr. Thomas Traynor was his friend and confidante of long standing. The two had learned to know and admire each other in the old newspaper days when both were cub

reporters; each regarded the other as his best friend. Kent was waiting for the 'phone call which he felt sure would reach him sooner or later.

As he lounged and smoked, carelessly at ease, he was good to look upon, this strapping, athletic, professional novelist. The fact that he kept himself always in physical trim was apparent in the healthy color of his skin and the clearness of his eyes. They were the eyes of a dreamer and an idealist in repose with little hint of the keen logical mind which enabled him to construct the fascinating plots over which the public clamored at the bookstores. Poet and romanticist by inclination, he dreamed of the literary masterpiece he would write sometime much as the fat comedian longs to play Hamlet; in his spare time it was one of his amusements to compose verse, a habit which Baxter, his publisher, never lost an opportunity to frown upon.

"Look here, Kent, cut out that slush!" he protested anxiously one day. "It's a sure sign of insanity, and if it ever spreads on you— Good night! You've hit a pay-streak. You're outselling every book on the market with that last one of yours. It's real literature, boy, even if it is a detective yarn and I'm telling you—"

And so on. Baxter was never through telling him, it seemed, and the funny part of it was that Baxter's enthusiasms were founded upon the public's insatiable appetite for Kent's novels. To Kent himself it was an unfailing source of amusement; for he took neither the novels nor his publisher very seriously. His financial success had not turned his head in the least; money

interested him mostly as a resource for self-improvement and the relief of others less fortunate than himself.

So he continued to fill his long-term contract with Baxter. Yet he enjoyed the mental exercise of plot building, too. It was a game of hare and hounds, a literary adventure that developed surprises as the trail lengthened. And because he was a thorough craftsman, Kent had become a keen student of crime and criminals. The bookcases in the room he had fitted up as his "fiction factory" were filled with valuable volumes, bearing upon all manner of researches; he had accumulated that library with an eye to rare books long out of print and not readily obtainable at the public libraries. It was a unique collection. So were the newspaper clippings, stored in his filing cabinets—perhaps the most complete collection in New York City, not even excluding the newspaper offices or police headquarters. The mind of Addison Kent was trained for his work with an efficiency that began in the Canadian university from which he had graduated and to which he had added as the years went by; odd bits of information upon an amazing range of subjects were stored there like clustering constellations in a kaleidoscope, forever grouping into new combinations as the need for their application arose.

It was this ready knowledge, coupled with his keen reasoning powers in analyzing human motives under given circumstances that at last had brought him into contact with the official police. He had been instrumental in assisting the police to unravel one or two baffling mysteries and the fact that he had been ready to

step aside from the limelight without accepting credit for his work had established very friendly relations at headquarters. Kent had considered himself more than repaid by the experience itself, having found the work highly interesting.

The details of what had happened at Hillcrest, as reported in the early extras, were necessarily meagre and he had soon tossed them aside. He knew of Traynor's deep interest in Rose Radcliffe, of course; also that Tommy had gone to Westchester for the week-end. Under the circumstances, he was surprised that Traynor had not called him on the 'phone long before this and he fully expected to hear the buzz of the instrument at any moment.

He was not quite prepared, however, for a familiar signal knock on the hall door and the unceremonious entry of Tommy Traynor himself. Kent sprang from his chair and hurriedly closed the door behind his visitor, aware at first glance that Traynor brought strange news. He went back to his chair without speaking.

"You've seen the papers, Ad." Traynor jerked his head at the discarded extras. "You're wondering why I'm not at Hillcrest. I was called on the 'phone last night and told that Lamont wanted to see me first thing this morning for a business conference. I left Hillcrest on the first train down this morning and the first I knew of—what's happened—was when I bought that extra. My God! it's awful! And me away—just when Rose needed me most!" He clenched his fists and took a turn across the room and back to get control of his voice.

"I'm going back to Westchester on the first train out. I want you to come along."

"Calm yourself, Tommy," advised Kent quietly. "There's no need for me to go; I'd only be in the way and you'll have all you can manage, handling the crowd of reporters and photographers—"

"No need for you to go?" echoed Traynor. He laughed mirthlessly. "Listen, Ad. Lamont didn't want me in here this morning; he's out of town, I find, over the week-end. It was a fake message!"

"Recognize the voice on the 'phone?"

"The wire wasn't very clear—I thought it was Baker, Lamont's secretary; but Baker denies it absolutely."

Kent laughed softly.

"Do you know that you were followed here, Tommy? Come here. Without disturbing the curtains take a look across the boulevard yonder." He pointed with the stem of his pipe and Traynor gave an exclamation as he noticed a man pausing to light a cigar and covertly glancing up at the windows of Kent's apartment.

"But I thought—the paper says Bob Fargey's been detailed on the case—Why, Bob and I know each other like a book!"

"Bob takes no chances," chuckled Kent. "You were missing when he got there and Fargey'd shadow his own mother if she crossed a murder trail. Now, sit down and tell me everything you can."

Traynor did so with the thoroughness of the experienced reporter and without interruption Kent listened attentively. Once or twice he stirred with interest; but

it was one of his characteristics to remain perfectly motionless with every muscle in repose for minutes at a stretch so that it was hard to tell how deeply he was impressed by what went on about him at the moment. As the recital reached its climax with the vanishing face at the window of Traynor's room, the strange behavior of Rose Radcliffe in the middle of the night, the still stranger encounter with the Gray Woman, and the frightened Levering, Addison Kent's eyes brightened and he smoked a little more rapidly at his pipe.

"Less than half an hour ago I was on my way to the Grand Central to find out when the next New York, New Haven and Hartford train pulled out, when I got my first glimpse of those headlines. I came straight here to get you. I want you to come along."

"Why?"

"Do you need to ask that, man? You're my friend and I request it for one thing. Rose is going to need our best help, poor girl. The wisdom of the police—even Friend Bob—in a difficult case isn't to be relied upon and you know it. And I miss my guess if this doesn't prove to be a corker. It's going to tax even your best wits, Ad."

Kent smoked in silence for a moment.

"I don't know that I'm altogether prepared to agree with you, Tommy—that it is too complicated for Fargey to handle alone, I mean," he said slowly.

"But there is something so infernally queer about what happened out there last night—" Traynor shuddered involuntarily and paced the room restlessly.

"On the face of it—yes. But that's just it, Tommy. It's these unusual features—outré, if you like—that may lead to quick solution. In simplicity lies—complication. There's a paradox for you!" He smiled. "You don't believe in ghosts, do you? I don't think Bob Fargey does either. He'll probably go after that spook and have the bracelets on it within forty-eight hours. He might resent my interference at this early stage."

"To the dickens with Fargey!" cried Traynor. "If Rose and I retain you to make an investigation outside the police enquiry altogether—that's our own business, isn't it?"

"But why not give Bob a chance at least?" objected Kent. "That's his business, Tommy. My business is writing detective tales, not actually attempting detective work. This super-detective thing is all right on paper, but when it comes down to brass tacks—Say, do you know what would happen to that famous story detective of mine, Professor Jefferson Crate, if he went up against the real thing? They'd lasso him and haul him away to an asylum!" Kent laughed whimsically.

"No, no, old man! I may get away with a lot of crazy nonsense in a piece of fiction that would only bring loud laughter if tried in practice. Suppose I do override the courtesies and tackle this case, how am I to make certain, for instance, that I have lots of footprints to work with? It doesn't snow in the summer time and there hasn't been a drop of rain for a week! My friend, Crate, would be utterly lost, you know, unless 'it had rained heavily the night before', or 'snow had fallen and

footprints were plainly visible.' And as for clues—"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Kent, have a heart! This is no time for kidding. What about that Acheson case you worked on? Donovan admits that if it hadn't been for your assistance—"

"Don't forget that the Blarney Stone is somewhere in Ireland."

"Bob Fargey's going to need all the help you can give him. Mark my words. Anyway, isn't it enough that I want you to help us—Rose and me?"

There was a note in Traynor's voice that made Kent look at him quickly. Tommy's face was worried, drawn in its anxiety, and at once Kent's whole manner altered. He laid aside his pipe and stood with his hands on his friend's shoulders in sudden contrition.

"Forgive me, Tommy. As it happens, I've just got the new thriller ready for Baxter; so I'm free. I've already looked up the time-table and our train leaves at 2.20."

Traynor sank into a chair with a breath of relief and reached for a cigar.

"Now you're talking," he grunted.

CHAPTER VII

THE OBLITERATED CLUE

THE shock which Traynor had received that morning as he stood in the street, excitedly reading the terrible news of the tragedy at the very place he had left but a few hours before, had thrown him into such a state of mental turmoil that for a time he scarcely knew what he was doing. He had come nearly being run down by the street traffic several times as he rushed for the nearest telephone booth he could find. The cool, insolent voice of the operator, informing him that the line was out of order, had steadied him finally, and immediately he had thought of Addison Kent.

Kent, of course. Kent would know exactly the best thing to do—Kent, the quiet, unassuming, long-headed, clever son-of-a-gun! As he made straight for Minaki Annex Traynor had thanked his stars for a friend like this to turn to, and he had not been long in Kent's presence before his mental tension began to relax. His confidence in Addison Kent's unusual abilities was supreme and with Kent's assurance of his best endeavor, he felt that the Hillcrest mystery was as good as solved.

As they went more thoroughly over all the details as Traynor knew them Kent already had helped him to a

saner view of the whole situation. In his confusion of thought and under the influence of Rose's fears and his subsequent nocturnal adventures, he had been imagining too much—creating mystery where no mystery was and so on. Was it so very strange that Miss Radcliffe had visited the library after the household was asleep? Had he forgotten that one of the two cases of jewels had been left out of the safe beneath the magazines on the library table when Henry Radcliffe had closed the door in irritation at being interrupted! In their excitement both of them had overlooked the fact. Suppose Miss Radcliffe, happening in to get a magazine, had discovered the jewel-case, would it not be natural for her to take charge of it—take it to her room, her father being asleep? Then, worried at the responsibility, suppose she went back to the library to see if she could open the safe or find some other hiding-place for the gems until morning. Suppose she was not satisfied to leave them there after all and decided to take them back to her room and keep them under her pillow for the night. Wouldn't that explain what he had seen her do? Was Traynor fool enough to think Rose Radcliffe was robbing her own father?

And Tommy had smiled and tried again to raise Hillcrest on the telephone. This time he got the connection and had talked a few moments with Rose herself, assuring her that he and Kent were even then getting ready to go to the depot. The tremble in that sweet voice at the other end of the wire, the relief in it, made Traynor realize more fully the strain under which she was

bearing up bravely. He chafed at the delay after that and insisted upon reaching the Grand Central half an hour before train time. Not until they were rattling off through the canyoned vistas of endless hives of rusty brick did his impatience begin to subside.

The sight of policemen, guarding the gateways of the Radcliffe residence, brought full realization of the change that had taken place since morning. The news of the murder already had attracted to the spot the usual crowd of morbidly curious people and Traynor counted at least five newspaper cameras and two motion-picture machines; no doubt a dozen or more newspaper reporters were roving around the great house—perhaps indoors, pestering Rose.

As if divining his thought, Kent reminded him that his first duty was to assist Rose and relieve her of as much detail as possible.

"I'll look after Fargey, Tommy. There he is now, filling that bunch of ink-slingers with wonderful copy."

A cigar tilted at a complacent angle and a patronizing smirk on his face, Lieutenant Robert Fargey at last had consented to give an interview to the reporters. It was something to which he was not unaccustomed; he was an adept at handing out a "story" without really saying anything very vital to the case of the moment. As Traynor and Kent approached he dismissed his audience with a wave of the hand and preceded the new arrivals into the house, not altogether pleased at the interruption and evidently surprised to see Addison Kent. However, he grinned at Tommy Traynor, whom he knew of

old, and shook hands with a show of cordiality.

"Kent's an old friend of the family, Bob; so I brought him along to help you," explained Tommy.

"Very kind," murmured Fargey, eyeing Kent non-committally. "We are always glad of expert assistance."

"I see you're right in the thick of it, Lieutenant," laughed Kent pleasantly, ignoring the emphasis on the adjective. "Just about cleaned up, eh?"

"Just about. You may as well see things for yourself, though. Come upstairs and I'll show you."

"Go ahead, Lieutenant. I'll be with you in a moment," and following Traynor, he stepped aside to pay his respects to the wan-faced girl who stood awaiting them at the drawing-room arch.

"This is the room," said Fargey when the other rejoined him and he unlocked the door.

The body of Henry Radcliffe had been removed, but he gave Kent a rapid review of the case and pointed to a chalk outline on the floor.

"Can you remember the exact attitude? Do you mind posing for me?"

With a smile at the request, Fargey allowed his body to collapse into the position in which the murdered man had been found. Kent studied the situation very closely. Then, when Fargey had risen, he stood over the spot and stretched out his left arm. It came in contact with the mirror over the mantel and he stepped closer to examine the glass.

"Did Mr. Radcliffe have a diamond ring on his left hand?" he asked. Fargey nodded. "Look at this, then."

A short curved scratch was visible on the surface of the mirror. At a point where the scratch ended a piece of bric-a-brac on the mantel had been newly chipped. Fargey glanced at Kent enquiringly.

"It looks as if there had been some sort of a struggle. The dead man's hand, possibly held in the grip of another, has swooped downward in a wide curve, the diamond in his ring scratching the glass."

"Might be an old scratch," suggested the lieutenant.

"Possibly. If you don't mind, though, we'll have one of your Bertillon experts look over these ornaments."

Standing once more within the chalked outline, Kent surveyed the room slowly. His eye focused suddenly upon something at the edge of the fireplace and, stooping quickly, he held out a tiny bit of yellow cardboard. It was scarcely half an inch long and about an eighth of an inch wide, torn at one end and burnt black at the other—

"A match," nodded Fargey, "evidently used to light a fire in the fireplace. It's often done, you know." His amusement was apparent.

"No doubt," smiled Kent. "I dare say Henry Radcliffe was in the habit of carrying these little packets of cardboard matches even in the pockets of his dressing-gown, advertising Somebody's Cigars; but the matches in that smoker's set on the table—"

His voice trailed away as he pocketed the fragment and walked into the alcove to examine the huge cherrywood wardrobe, built in solidly at the back. He opened the doors of it and peered in among the hangers that dis-

played a neat array of suits. Then dropping to hands and knees, he began a systematic search of the carpet within the alcove.

"We're progressing a little at any rate," he said with quiet satisfaction as he came out, and the surprised lieutenant saw that he held another of the yellow cardboard matches in his fingers.

"No doubt you have your own ideas of what happened in this room—," Kent began.

"Oh, never mind me!" retorted Fargey. "Go ahead. You're doing fine!" He grinned; but it was without mirth. He was beginning to wonder if he had really examined the room. Not that those yellow matches mattered in the least—

"Twenty-five caliber automatic, I believe you said, Fargey?" pursued Kent, amiably ignoring the other's manner. "Did anybody hear the shot fired?"

"Not a soul in the house."

Kent pondered this fact for a moment, then strode swiftly towards the window of the sitting-room. He threw open the French lattice, glanced at the direction of the fire-escape, then drawing in his head, began a careful inspection of the velour hangings. As he parted fold after fold he presently gave a grunt of satisfaction.

"Here we are, Lieutenant. Look."

Fargey's face was a study as he came slowly across the room to examine the curtain which Kent was holding out to him. He gazed at the small hole, stained brown all around, but said nothing. He nodded with the air of one who already had discovered the hole.

"The shot was fired from the fire-escape, of course."

"Of course."

"By a short man perhaps, although we can't rely on this bullet-hole as an indication of height. He might have been on one knee—"

"What's the matter with making it a tall woman?—might have stood at the railing at that!"

Kent shook his head and chuckled.

"Or it might have been somebody of medium height like you and me," growled Fargey. "Can you decide which of us did the deed?"

"Let's take a look out here," said Kent, climbing out onto the fire-escape as he spoke.

His gaze swiftly covered the surroundings. The view of the grounds and the wooded reaches beyond was magnificent; but Addison Kent was not admiring scenery. The lure of the chase was taking possession of him and his immediate concern was the fire-escape and more particularly the metal landing directly in front of the window. He waved Fargey back and got down on hands and knees to examine every inch of it closely, slowly working his way towards the point where the steps descended.

His next move was somewhat surprising. He scuffed the metal floor with his boot, examined the sole, then the spot where he had rubbed it. Abruptly he reached for the police officer's ankle, lifted his foot and glanced at the sole. Both of them were wearing fine boots with sewn soles and he shook his head as he looked up.

"No, neither of us did the deed," he said with utmost

gravity. "Unless, Lieutenant, you've changed your boots."

Fargey stared at him blankly. Then he laughed and placed a hand over his heart in mock distress.

"Don't scare a fellow out of his boots like that, Kent!"

"The man who committed this murder was wearing heavy boots, thick soles, worn down so that the nails were prominent. He paid a visit to this fire-escape since the shooting—perhaps during the night; perhaps to-day some time."

"Wha—what's that?" gasped Fargey. "Surely you're not serious?"

"There's the proof of it," and he pointed to a spot near the railing where the paint had been scuffed completely off a segment of the grating. The whole fire-escape had been painted recently; the scratches of the boot-nails were quite distinct.

"But, good heavens, Kent—!" protested Fargey skeptically.

"I confess that I have the advantage of you, Lieutenant. You see, Traynor has given me quite a lot of information. During the night Tommy was awakened by some sound and saw somebody looking into his room. He lost a few valuable moments, trying to collect his senses, so that when he opened the window and looked he could neither see nor hear anyone. The light was poor; the moon was behind a large cloud—"

Fargey, who had been listening in a sort of trance, came to life suddenly.

"I know," he interrupted. "You mean an athletic per-

son could climb over the railing and hang by his or her hands from the grating?"

"Exactly. You note that this platform extends beneath both windows—Traynor's and Radcliffe's—and the mark is about half way between. It's the only way to account for the disappearance."

"But you say this person has been back here since the shooting?"

"I think so. I can only guess at the time, of course."

"But the risk of discovery—"

"Was not greater at the time than it would be now if the murderer had not returned." He pointed to the scuffed grating and to two or three similar spots on the railing where the paint had been thoroughly scratched away. "A perfectly good clue has been completely obliterated there, Lieutenant."

Fargey rubbed his chin reflectively and nodded.

"Finger-prints," he muttered. "By George, Kent, that's good work—even if it doesn't get us anywhere." The sarcasm was entirely missing from his tone now and he looked up with a new respect. "Let's get inside before some of those snooping reporters catch sight of us." He hesitated. "What d'you say if we work this thing together, old man?"

"That's what I'm here for—to give what help I can."

"Come on inside and I'll show you everything I've picked up and tell you everything I've learned since I came here."

Addison Kent smiled quietly to himself as he followed through the window. He had not hoped for such quick capitulation.

CHAPTER VIII

"THE LADY IS LYING"

LIEUTENANT FARGEY passed over his cigar case with friendly insistence, then felt in his pocket and handed Kent the small, fully-loaded S. & W. revolver which he had found in the room.

"It was like that when I picked it up," he explained. "And this here gold pencil with indelible lead was clutched in the right hand—like it was grabbed from its chain in the struggle. A woman did this murder, Kent. That's a lady's pencil. There was a woman in here with Radcliffe last night—"

"Maybe. But she did not do the shooting—"

"Why not?" objected Fargey. "She had an argument with Radcliffe. They struggled. She broke away to escape by the window, turned and fired through the curtain."

"It was a man's face Traynor saw looking in on him in the moonlight."

"Moonlight is deceptive, and Traynor was only half awake," argued Fargey eagerly. "And I know lots of women could do that stunt of hanging beneath the fire-escape out of sight—dead easy."

"The boots—"

"There's coarse boots for women as well as men."

"Then, those yellow cardboard advertising matches—"

The lieutenant made a gesture of impatience.

"I don't put any stock in them. One of the servants might have dropped 'em—chambermaid with a waste-basket in her arm—anything you like. I've got a hunch it's a skirt we've got to look for, Kent."

"Do you believe in ghosts, Lieutenant?" asked Kent abruptly.

Fargey's hand hovered over the ash-tray as he looked up quickly. He knocked the ashes off his cigar with a smart tap of the finger.

"I dunno," he grinned. "Do you? There's a lot o' people in Ireland believe in banshees—You're referrin' to this here spook last night Traynor an' this man Levering say they saw—"

"You've heard about it, then?"

"Levering told me the yarn this mornnig—seemed to take it seriously enough, too." Fargey smoked thoughtfully. "Traynor told you about this Roger Levering?—guest in the house—queer-looking fish, but seems decent enough. We'll look him up after a bit. What do you make of the ghost business?"

"Somebody masquerading, of course."

"I think so, too—a woman, don't forget. It was a woman they saw. We've got a pretty unusual case here, Kent; we'll get to the bottom of it when we find who tore off the shirt-cuff that was missing from the left sleeve of Radcliffe's shirt."

This was news to Addison Kent and he leaned forward intently.

"Tell me all you know about that."

"We don't know much—except that the cuff's gone. We've ransacked the place inside and out, of course, without finding it. I asked myself why anybody would want to tear off one of the sleeve-ends like that and there seems to be only one answer. The doc says Radcliffe might've lived a few minutes after he was shot and it's my guess he wrote a message of some kind on his cuff—perhaps with that gold pencil that was in his hand."

"And someone interested returned to the room and removed the message?"

Fargey nodded. There was a glint of satisfaction in his eyes as he looked importantly at the other's thoughtful face.

"I'm willin' to bet dollars to doughnuts that message identifies the murderer."

"At any rate it is very important," agreed Kent. "Too bad. Another good clue very likely destroyed by this time."

"Damn the luck!" Lieutenant Fargey savagely bit the end off his cigar and spat it out in disgust. "But we'll get her if it takes a year!" he vowed. His jaw was set and there was a menace in his eyes that boded ill for the object of his wrath. He saw Kent studying the expression with interest and he gave a short laugh and gestured with his pudgy hand. "I take this thing pretty serious, Kent; I admit it. It's the second robbery of the kind within the week and feelin's beginnin' to run high at headquarters. I—I've got to make good on it, y'understand. I've got to make a good showing—" He

broke off and gazed at the floor in abstraction for a moment. “It ain’t that there’s a bunch o’ fellows at the Central Office waitin’ for my job,” he said slowly, “I don’t want you to think that for a minute. But my work’s what I live for and it gets my nanny when things ain’t goin’ right.”

“All the more credit to you, Lieutenant.” Kent smiled reassuringly; the jealousies which he surmised lay back of Fargey’s words were easy enough to understand. “Obliterated finger-prints or missing shirt-cuffs are not going to stop us. What else have you got?”

“I searched his clothes without finding anything. This is the thing that did the trick.” He handed over the bullet which the coroner had extracted and Kent turned it over in his fingers.

“No sign of the ejected shell anywhere?” Fargey shook his head. “How about the servants?”

“There’s ten of ’em altogether, counting the seamstress who sleeps out and the butler who bosses the bunch. They don’t seem to know very much—all been with the family for some time, except Thompson, the butler; he’s on’y been here about a month. The bureau is looking him up.”

“Who else was in the house last night?”

“Besides Miss Radcliffe and her father, there were three guests—Traynor, Mr. Levering and his aunt, Mrs. Saint-Anton. Everybody’s accounted for.”

“And not one of them heard the shot fired?”

“So they say.”

"Twenty-five caliber, automatic—it would not make a very loud noise if it were—"

He rose and went over to examine the heavy velour window drape once more, presently reaching down and lifting up the bottom of the curtain which was of double thickness where the end had been turned up in a wide hem. As Kent held it out for inspection, the lieutenant of detectives saw several minute creases and counted no less than three more bullet-holes.

"Been wrapped around the gun, eh?"

"Evidently," nodded Kent. "That would muffle it effectively. Besides, it was not fired indoors. Got identification of this revolver yet?" He handed back both it and the bullet as he spoke.

"Miss Radcliffe says it's one her father always kept handy in his room. Looks like he was expecting trouble of some kind, eh?—knew the woman who visited him last night was dangerous."

"You think he was expecting this visit?"

"Don't know for sure; but the bed hadn't been slept in. Doc. fixes the shooting somewheres around two o'clock in the morning."

Kent was eyeing the detective keenly now. He got up and stepped to the window. For a moment he leaned out, studying the descent of the fire-escape, then slowly drew in his head.

"Entrance to the room may be had—?"

"Two ways and two ways only," replied Fargey, "—the hall door and the fire-escape."

"The last section of the steps is hauled up high on the

wall by weights just heavy enough to hold it there," stated Kent half to himself. "A person to reach the fire-escape without using this hoisted section would require a ladder probably; if they used the fire-escape steps—the chances are the pulleys would squeal loud enough to wake a pretty heavy sleeper. The section has not been disturbed from its position for some time—"

"Exactly," nodded Lieutenant Fargey eagerly.

"So that whoever came into this room last night came through the hall door in the regular way—that's what you want me to say, Lieutenant?"

"The hall door—yes."

"Then the conclusion is that the midnight visitor—"

"Wait!" Fargey held up his hand for silence, stepped softly across to the door and suddenly yanked it open. Satisfied that nobody was eavesdropping, he came back eagerly.

"The woman who came here last night to see Radcliffe," he said in lowered tones, "was already in the house."

"A member of the household?" Kent's tone was indicative of disbelief.

"She slept here last night."

"It isn't a good plan to go upon any preconceived theory, Lieutenant," warned Kent with a doubtful shake of the head. "Once it is exploded, your investigation is all at sea."

"I'm not just guessing," objected Fargey. "Everybody—the women folks, that is—was in bed before one o'clock last night—except two. Miss Radcliffe went down to the library during the night—"

"What time?"

"About two o'clock, she thinks it was. She found a case of pearls under some magazines in the library; she wasn't sleeping very well and that's what she went down for—to get a magazine. She doesn't know how the jewels got left out of the safe; but there they were and she took 'em to her room, not wanting to disturb her father."

"And the other woman—?"

"Owns that gold pencil that was clutched in the dead man's hand. Mr. Levering recognized it at once as one belonging to his aunt."

"Mrs. Saint-Anton?"

There was a gleam of triumph in Fargey's eyes as he nodded his head.

"You've said it. She admits it's hers but says she lost it shortly after she arrived here. She also denies that she was outside her bedroom last night."

"You have reason for thinking otherwise?"

"The maid that was attending her says the lady told her this morning she'd had a miserable night. Besides, how did that pencil come to be where we found it?"

"Mr. Radcliffe might have found it, intending to return it to its owner and have forgotten to do so—"

Lieutenant Fargey interrupted impatiently.

"Here's the rest of the chain that belongs to the pencil," he said, drawing it from a pocket of his vest.

"Hayes picked it up outside."

"Outside the house?" asked Kent in surprise.

"Just underneath the fire-escape!" Fargey slipped his

thumbs in the armholes of his vest and leaned back in his chair with the air of a man who has proved his case. "And if that ain't enough, Mr. Levering'll tell you that he found the pencil and chain unbusted yesterday morning—out in the grounds somewheres—and gave it back to his aunt half an hour afterwards."

"Does she deny that?"

"No. She's too clever to deny that part of it. She says she left it on the dresser in her room and didn't miss it till this morning."

Addison Kent smiled a little.

"And suppose what she says is the truth, Lieutenant?"

"Excuse me, Kent, but I ain't been in this business with my eyes shut. I *know* when people are telling me the truth. The lady is lying—lying to beat the band!"

A knock on the door startled them.

CHAPTER IX

CONCERNING A BELIEF IN SPIRITS

“**W**ELL, what do you want?” demanded Fargey as he stood with his shoulder against the half open doorway and glared at the butler with no great friendliness.

“Sorry, sir, if I am intruding. Mr. Traynor asked me to find you and say that he would be glad if you and the other gentleman could join him in the library, sir. He is waiting there now, sir. That is all, sir.”

“We’ll be down in a minute or two.”

“Very good, sir.”

As Thompson bowed and made a dignified retreat, the lieutenant of detectives stood watching him, chewing on his cigar. When he closed the door and came back to his chair the frown still lingered between his bushy eyebrows.

“Some o’ these here servants get my goat for fair,” he growled as he resumed his seat. “That bucko’s too polite to be a real guy. Say, it must be fierce to be livin’ with flunkies like that always hangin’ around you. He took my soup away from me when they served me a late lunch to-day, and I rather liked the stuff, too—had a hard time cleanin’ anything off my plate. If I was one of these High Muckymucks—”

"Oh, heaven forfend, Fargey!" laughed Kent.

"I'll bet that guy's been in Yurrupe, and was born quiet in some dook's kitchen while his mother was washin' the dishes or something. He acts like his whole family'd been purrin' around palaces over there for a couple o' hundred years. Over in Yurrupe—"

"Ever been in Europe?"

"Who? Me! Not Robert Fargey! Couldn't get me over there on a bet. This country's good enough for me. You can't go nowheres these days that you ain't seen it already in the movies or on picture-postcards anyways. Well, what do you say if we go down and see what Tommy Traynor wants?"

"You go on down and I'll join you in a minute. I want to take one more look around the room, if you don't mind."

"Oh, all right. Go as far as you like," and with a wave of his hand Lieutenant Fargey sauntered out.

As soon as the door had closed Addison Kent slipped across to the window without noise and crawled through. He ran down the fire-escape as far as he could, then dropped easily to the driveway. Here he began a careful scrutiny of the hard packed chipped gravel. He glanced up to locate the windows and, gauging the direction, continued the search on the farther edge of the driveway. Almost immediately he found what he was looking for, half hidden by the edge of the turf. The crunch of a heavy step sent him behind a large lilac bush and he chuckled as he saw the lieutenant of detectives approach and begin to duplicate his own actions.

"'Great minds run in the same groove'," he quoted as he revealed himself. "No use wasting time there, Lieutenant," and he held out the article he had just picked up, laughing at the chagrin on the other's face.

"You found the shell?"

"As you see. Does the bullet fit?"

Fargey fumbled in his pocket and tried it. It fitted perfectly.

"So much for that," he grunted. Then he eyed Addison Kent coldly. "Tryin' to put one over on me already?"

But Kent only laughed and slapped him on the shoulder and assured him that nothing of the sort had been intended.

"You can rely upon me collaborating fully, Fargey. Without absolute frankness between us, we cannot hope to work together successfully."

"I've heard Donovan praising you up often enough to know better, Kent; so forget it," growled Fargey, apparently half ashamed of his insinuation. "I'm used to working alone and I get my eats by being suspicious—of everybody. For all I know, you may be the guy that committed this murder. Get me?"

"I thought you said it was a woman!"

"So it was! Come on, Traynor's waiting."

They found Tommy pacing slowly up and down the library, his hands behind his back and his mien one of deep thought. He had just come from his interview with Rose Radcliffe and it had been rather a trying ordeal in some respects. Although she was putting on a brave

front in public and going about her duties with her usual efficiency, she had given way to her grief when talking to Traynor and he had been strangely stirred. It was as if she looked upon him as the only one who could be leaned upon absolutely—as if with her father gone he alone was nearest and dearest enough to be turned to without restraint in her great trouble. And as Traynor had tried to comfort her as best he might he had accepted the trust and made a silent vow that he would not rest until Henry Radcliffe's murderer had been brought to justice. It was no time to talk of love, but the light of understanding was in their eyes. To remove the shadow of mystery from this beautiful girl's life, to bring again the smiles to her lips and the brightness of happiness to her eyes—surely this were a privilege which transcended all else in life! And his face had grown very tender as these thoughts possessed him.

There was nothing of tenderness in the expression with which he greeted the two men when they entered the library, however. His eyes were alert, his face somewhat hard, the face of a young man who had justly earned his reputation in business circles as being "a live wire." Tommy Traynor was "on the job."

"I think we'd better hold a council of war, Bob. Should we call in Levering or not? I'm leaving that for you to say."

"By all means. Why not? I want Kent to meet him and he seems anxious enough to help."

Traynor's finger went out to an electric bell button at the edge of the huge library table.

"See if you can locate Mr. Levering and ask him to come here at once, Thompson."

While they waited Lieutenant Fargey and Kent examined the safe which still stood with doors yawning wide. Nothing had been touched, upon Fargey's strict instructions. Traynor recited briefly the facts of his short interview with Henry Radcliffe on the evening preceding.

"I've questioned Rose pretty closely, Ad., but her actions last night are easily explained. It was as you surmised. She knocked on her father's door about two o'clock but got no answer. That was just after she found the pearls under the papers there. She came back down to the library, rather than wake him up, hoping to find the combination, then decided to keep the jewel-case in her own room until morning. That's all there is about it. She said she had reported the facts to you, Bob."

Fargey nodded.

"What I can't understand is why a man with lots of money like Radcliffe kept an old model like that—Why, I know a dozen yeggs could get into that thing in two minutes—and keep their soup in their pockets at that."

"Mr. Radcliffe wasn't in the habit of using that safe for valuables, Bob," volunteered Traynor. "Anyway, the combination was stolen—At least, it can't be found. Hello, Levering. Come in."

Kent turned, but there was nothing in his manner to indicate the interest with which he took in every detail of the newcomer's appearance. He acknowledged Traynor's introduction with casual friendliness. Roger Levering, however, was more effusive.

"It was only a few moments ago, Mr. Kent, that I learned from Traynor we were honored by the presence of a real live author in the house. I am indeed delighted to meet you, sir. Is it permissible for me to tell you that I read that last book of yours with tremendous interest?"

"Permissible—if you are utterly reckless of your reputation for literary taste," smiled Kent rather wearily. He was so used to this sort of thing!

"I've read every book you ever wrote—and enjoyed them all, Mr. Kent; I am partial to detective stories and I am not literary snob enough to be ashamed of it," declared Levering, looking around at the others with a challenge. "But pardon me, Traynor. You sent for me?"

Tommy explained and at once Levering's manner became serious; there was no doubting the sincerity of his appreciation that he had been invited to the conference. He was anxious—even eager to help in every possible way and placed himself entirely at their command. He seemed to recognize at once that Traynor had assumed a rightful place as Miss Radcliffe's representative in the household.

As briefly as possible Traynor stated the situation. The police were in absolute charge of Hillcrest until after the coroner's inquest and as much longer as Lieutenant Fargey should see fit. Every member of the household had been subpoenaed to give evidence and it was hoped that the formal enquiry would clear away much of the mystery that seemed to hang about the tragic

event that had taken place last night. Meanwhile, it was Miss Radcliffe's wish that every possible assistance be given the police in arriving at the facts.

She had been worrying about the collar of pearls that she had found in the library; the safe was no longer—safe. Traynor had thought it best to ask Mr. Armaund Lamont to run out to Hillcrest to advise Miss Radcliffe in regard to her father's collection of precious stones with which he was more or less familiar; also he could take charge of the pearls for her and it was just possible he might be able to throw some light upon the mysterious telephone message which Traynor had received, calling him into town unnecessarily. Mr. Lamont had promised to come at once.

"Will you be sleeping here to-night, Bob?"

"That's hardly necessary with you three fellows in the house," replied Lieutenant Fargey. "Some of my men will be about and I'm within easy reach if needed."

"I thought you might like to take a whack at the ghost," grinned Traynor.

"The ghost's out o' business. She won't worry you no more," assured Fargey. "She knows she's liable to get a bullet through her bread-basket if she pokes her nose around here again—"

"She had no nose, Bob, and ghosts are unaffected by bullets."

"Bunk, Traynor! You don't believe in the thing, do you?" demanded the lieutenant. "Mr. Levering here—"

"We both saw it—," began Tommy, regarding him with amusement.

"And even if she was the genuine article—the ghost is through here. 'Cause why? Her work's done."

"You mean the ghost—killed Henry Radcliffe?"

"We'll see—what we'll see," said Fargey grimly.

"I would be glad to hear Mr. Levering's explanation of the strangest feature of the case," suggested Addison Kent who had been studying Roger Levering's expression which had altered subtly at mention of the apparition that had frightened him so the night before. "I believe you can corroborate Traynor's yarn about the thing, Mr. Levering?"

Levering's starey little eyes behind their thick glasses turned directly upon his questioner. There was a faint indication of moisture on his forehead and he wiped it away with his handkerchief rather impatiently.

"It is one of the strangest experiences I ever had," he murmured solemnly.

"Tell us exactly what you saw or think you saw."

"There can be no question that both Mr. Traynor and myself saw the phenomenon. We are agreed on its appearance in every detail," and Roger Levering proceeded to relate his version of the encounter; it coincided perfectly with what Traynor had already described to Kent.

"You are not satisfied altogether that it was a masquerade?" suggested the latter.

"I would not like to say that," Levering replied after a moment's hesitation. "It probably—" Again he hesitated.

"You believe in spirit manifestations?" persisted Kent.

"Frankly, gentlemen, I do." He glanced at each of them in turn with something of challenge in the look as if he feared they might laugh at the admission. But none of them was even smiling. "I have given some study to psychic phenomena and I may tell you at once that I have every reason to believe the evidence in favor of visualization. In fact, I myself have had several experiences of the kind."

"The subject interests me greatly," said Kent soberly. "You mean you have personally experienced phantasms, Mr. Levering? Of living or dead persons?"

"Both," admitted Levering. "It is because of this that I hesitate to reach any hasty conclusion—about last night. The evidence, Mr. Kent, is overwhelmingly in favor of the existence of a definite spirit world. If you have gone into the published documents of the psychical research societies—" He paused for an answer.

"I have."

"Then you must admit that even discounting all cases where elements of doubt creep in, there still remains enough direct evidence—"

"I can quite understand your hesitation, Mr. Levering," nodded Kent. "It is a pretty deep subject and some of the keenest scientific minds all over the world have accepted the belief. Personally, I have never been able to get beyond reach of the subconscious mind. Our mental machinery is so complex and delicate that it plays us strange tricks at times—particularly in the matter of vision. Hallucinations and illusions—"

Levering interrupted with a gesture of protest.

"We must make due allowances for hallucinations, of course, Mr. Kent. But even so, if you will examine the 'International Census of Waking Hallucinations in the Sane' you will find narratives which will convince you—"

"That the narrators who claim to have been in the waking state when they saw their vision generally admit in the course of their accounts that they were feeling drowsy at the time or were not sure whether they were awake or asleep."

"Not all of them," said Levering earnestly. "Sane people with their eyes wide open—"

"See a straight stick appear bent when thrust into a pool of clear water," interrupted Kent. "And when a burning stick is swung in a circle they see a ring of fire when no such ring of fire exists."

"That is due to a persistence of impression upon the retina," retorted Levering.

"Or take an advertising poster," interjected Traynor. "What about a portrait or a pointing finger that seems to follow you wherever you move?"

"That's because the picture is a flat projection; the front of the portrait's eye and the pointing finger are presented to you from whatever angle you look. For the same reason the flat drawing of—a cube, say—may delude with the impression of solidity."

"What makes it look like the train you're on is stand-in' still while the freight-cars you're passing are doin' the travelling in the opposite direction?" This contribution

came from Lieutenant Fargey with gusto; he was enjoying the baiting.

"Yes, or the whole landscape moving?" added Traynor.

"Or the moon plowing through the clouds," smiled Levering. "Optical delusions, all of them, quite beside the point."

"Seen by sane people with their eyes wide open," reminded Kent, laughing. "You can't get away from it, Levering. If we look through a prism we see objects doubled. If we press an eyeball we get divergence of the axes of vision. The sun appears to move around the earth when it does nothing of the sort; telegraph wires alongside the moving train seem to rise and sink rhythmically when they don't. The rising moon appears to alter its size as it climbs higher in the sky. People five or six feet tall seem to be pigmies when we look down on them from a high building. Does a railroad track really converge to a one-rail affair at the vanishing point?"

"Illusions of sight—mere fallacies of perception," protested Levering.

"So much for the reliability of the human eye. We can go on similarly with tricks of the brain, if you wish. What happens upon removing a tight bandage from your finger? It feels as if it were still bound up, doesn't it? The tingling sensation of the pressure remains. The conjuror presses the coin into your palm before removing it in order that you may think it is still there after he has closed your fingers. Fallacies like these are of

universal experience. By the time we add to the list auditory hallucinations and loss of the sense of smell and taste, one is forced to the conclusion that not only is seeing not believing but about the only sense that can be relied upon is a sense of shame for man's prococity."

Levering shook his head, unconvinced.

"Do you believe in telepathy?" he asked quietly. "You admit, then, that there is a sixth sense, strange premonitions. You have only to examine the records of apparitions that have appeared to relatives prior to death or prior to some crisis—"

"It is difficult to obtain satisfactory evidence—of the coincidental character of the vision with the event," objected Kent.

"This sort of thing is of too frequent occurrence to be merely fortuitous," asserted Levering with conviction.

"Do you think the presence of this ghost woman last night had any such relation to the death of Mr. Radcliffe?" asked Traynor, suddenly thoughtful.

"That's the point. It may have a telepathic bearing. In my humble opinion it is quite possible; but then, I believe in the necessary premises—that there is such a thing as spirit life and that visual manifestations do take place."

"Have you ever talked to Mr. Radcliffe about this sort of thing, Mr. Levering?"

"No. The subject never came up between us."

"Do you know that of late he had taken up the study of psychic phenomena—and shared your belief in these things?"

"No, I was not aware of that," replied Levering with sudden interest.

Traynor turned to the lieutenant of detectives.

"There is a phase of this mystery, Bob, with which you are not yet familiar. Miss Radcliffe wished to confer with me before making any statement. There is no desire, though, to withhold any fact that can possibly have a bearing upon the situation."

He then told them all that he had learned in regard to the three warnings which Henry Radcliffe's daughter had received and the vision which the murdered man claimed to have had. During the recital Addison Kent covertly watched the other two auditors to whom these facts were new. Their astonishment and interest was manifest. Fargey was leaning forward, his mouth half open and his cigar neglected. Roger Levering plainly was deeply impressed by this unexpected support of the argument he had just been making.

"I take back what I said a moment ago," he declared at last, turning to Kent. "I do not think that what Traynor and I saw last night was anybody, masquerading as a ghost."

"You think it was a genuine psychic presence?"

"I believe so."

Fargey wet his lips. He swore softly.

Then he looked up with a start. Unnoticed by anyone, the butler was standing in the room, a tray with glasses in his hands.

CHAPTER X

ROGER LEVERING LOCKS THE DOOR

“**M**ISS RADCLIFFE’S compliments, sir,” he murmured to Traynor as he deposited the tray with its liquid refreshments upon the table.

“You may close the door after you when you go out, Thompson, and kindly see that we are not disturbed.”

“Yes, sir,” bowed the butler and forthwith he retired softly with a somewhat abashed air.

“How much did that guy hear? That’s what I want to know,” scowled the lieutenant in a low voice full of resentment. “He’s got to take the pads off his feet or I’ll lock him up where he can’t listen quite so handy.”

Levering cleared his throat.

“It will be very awkward for Miss Radcliffe if this psychic phase of the case frightens the servants into leaving without notice,” he ventured. “If I may make a suggestion, Mr. Fargey, it would be well if the whole matter were eliminated entirely for the time being—until some tangible evidence is forthcoming of its significance. It only complicates things unnecessarily and I agree with you that the apparition is very unlikely to make any further appearance, whether we admit its genuineness or not.”

Traynor added his endorsement of the suggestion as he passed around the refreshments. Fargey looked enquiringly at Addison Kent who nodded slowly, his eyes fixed on Levering.

"It may help rather than hinder your investigations, Lieutenant," he said. "I think Mr. Levering is right."

"I think I'll take a mooch around," Fargey decided suddenly and emptied his glass. "See you later."

A few minutes afterwards Tommy Traynor also excused himself and Kent reached for a fresh cigar, first passing the humidor to Roger Levering who seemed to welcome the opportunity for a confidential chat.

"I've noticed you looking at me rather intently once or twice, Mr. Kent," he began, "and as I am sure that we have not met before—you don't mind me mentioning such a trivial matter? People frequently look at me that way and I have traced it to my rather uncommon glasses. Do they make me look like a freak, or what?"

There was no resentment in the tone and he smiled at his own question.

"Oh, I wouldn't like to say that!" protested Kent, somewhat taken aback for the moment at the man's perspicacity in voicing the very thought that was passing through the author's head.

"I am troubled with hypermetropia, to give it its full name."

"It sounds impressive. You are far-sighted."

"Very far-sighted, Mr. Kent."

For a moment it almost seemed to the novelist that he sensed some vague threat underlying the repetition, a

double meaning. Or was it merely that the expressionless stare behind the distorting lenses conveyed an undue solemnity to the words? He laughed softly, recalling his own advice to Fargey about the importance of not jumping to theoretical conclusions upon mere suspicion.

"To be short-sighted would be a much greater handicap, I should think," he said easily as he proceeded to light his cigar.

"I suppose so," sighed Levering. "I have had to wear these confounded things constantly and there are times when I abominate them. It annoys me to see ladies—" He stopped abruptly as if saying too much.

"Do you never leave them off, then—the spectacles?"

"I dare not do so because I am lost without them. However, one is helpless in these matters at birth and should be philosophical about it." He smiled in dismissal of a disagreeable topic. "Forgive me, Kent, for talking trivialities when there is so much that could be discussed with greater profit. You are not busy for a while, are you? Suppose you come up to my room where we are sure of absolute privacy. There is something of grave importance about which I would like your advice as a friend."

"Certainly," said Kent, rising at once. "I have nothing to do but finish this cigar. If I can be of any service—"

Murmuring his thanks, Roger Levering led the way upstairs to the rooms he was occupying. It was a suite arrangement, like the other guest chambers on the first floor, consisting of sitting-room with open fireplace, bedroom and beyond that a private bathroom. As they en-

tered Kent noted that Levering's rooms were at the end of the passage, two doors distant from the room where last night's tragedy had been enacted.

"Who occupies the rooms next to you?" he asked.

"My aunt, Mrs. Saint-Anton. You will not meet her until dinner to-night as she is lying down with a bad headache. Then come the quarters which poor Radcliffe occupied, and next past that is where Traynor is. Take that easy chair, Kent. Throw off your coat and make yourself at home."

Levering set the example by tossing his own coat aside and, nothing loath, Kent did the same. Collars and ties followed and in spite of Kent's protest Levering rang for the butler and requested him to mix long cool drinks "à la Johnathan Collins. Kent could not resist a smile; he was unable to decide, however, whether Levering was indulging in the facetious or whether he really was unfamiliar with the Christian names of our great inventors.

One of the first things that caught Kent's roving eye was a small bottle of purple ink that stood on the open lid of the writing-desk, where it had been spilled on some of the notepaper and envelopes scattered there. Levering, returning from boosting the window higher, noticed the direction of the glance and apologized for the untidy appearance of the desk.

"The routine of the servants has been somewhat upset by the general excitement, I guess," he said as he walked over and closed the desk. "I upset the ink last night when I was writing some letters; I wasn't sleepy and got

out of bed to do some correspondence I'd forgotten when I heard—or thought I heard—someone out in the hall. I went to the door and looked out and that was when I first caught sight of the lady ghost. It gave me quite a start and I shut the door quickly and dropped into the chair at the desk. I was trying to put the cork in the bottle and upset the thing. Scarcely a man's prerogative, eh—fumbling corks?" He laughed. "By George! Kent, I was all in a tremble for a minute, it was so unexpected, don't you know? I got over it after a bit and went out to investigate. I've nearly rubbed the skin off my fingers with pumice and lemon, getting the indelible ink-stain off," and he laughed again as he held out his hand for inspection.

"Say, you play chess, of course?" he asked suddenly.

"Why no, it's a game I have never learned," replied Kent as he followed Levering's glance towards the chess-board that stood on the mantel beside its box of pieces and pawns. "I guess it's a good enough game all right; but it has always seemed to me too complicated to take time to learn it."

"It's the greatest game in the world!" cried Levering enthusiastically. Then a shade of disappointment crossed his face. "Pshaw! I was sure you knew how to play it. In that last novel of yours—Surely you are spoofing, Kent?—Why, those chess moves you describe in that chapter near the end are almost professional in their ingenuity—where you have your hero playing a game of chess with the criminal, you remember?"

"Oh, yes," laughed Kent, "but you don't realize, Lev-

ering, that a writer has to go to experts in many different directions at times to get correct data. I got all that from a friend of mine who is a fiend at the game; I am indebted to him entirely for that passage."

"I am very much disappointed, declared Levering, and he showed it. "I have been taking lessons with one of the New York experts in the game and have been trying to find someone to practice with ever since I came here. You ought to take it up; I'm sure you'd like it and become very proficient in it. Later on I'll give you your first lesson or two, if you like. But that is not what I brought you up here to talk about—Ah, this looks good," he finished as the butler entered with two tall glasses, tinkling with ice.

Levering took the tray from him and dismissed him. He waited a moment, then went to the door and turned the key in the lock.

"I have a few questions to ask first, Mr. Kent, and if I seem to presume upon such short acquaintance, I hope you will allow my anxiety to excuse my apparent impertinence. The questions are pertinent rather than impertinent."

Kent nodded politely, but for a few moments Roger Levering stirred and sipped his drink in thoughtful silence.

"Just what is your status in this police enquiry?" he began at length. "Are you a professional detective as well as a professional writer of detective stories?"

"Not at all, Levering. I am a writer by profession, as you know. I am here merely to help in any way I

can—like yourself, I presume—because I am a friend of Miss Radcliffe and Mr. Traynor.”

“Are they engaged? But no, I should not have asked that; it doesn’t matter. You are not officially connected with the police, then?”

“No.”

“But you have done work for them, I understand. Haven’t you?”

“Who told you that?”

“Fargey. However, that doesn’t matter either, as long as you are not working officially with them on this case.”

“Just what do you mean?” asked Kent in surprise.

“Presently, presently; but please let me go on in my own way, Mr. Kent. I must be sure that I understand your position thoroughly before I can speak—I—Frankly, old chap, I am worried about—” He hesitated again and Addison Kent’s eyes never left his face.

“About what?” he prompted with just the right shade of polite sympathy in his tone.

“Something—which is too personal not to be—very disturbing. Please let me come at it in my own way. I am surprised to learn that you are not in charge of this case instead of the official police. Frankly, I am not overwhelmingly impressed with the perspicacity of this man, Fargey; I am in complete agreement with your Professor Crate—in your novels, you know—in believing that the official police are a pack of stupid asses—”

“I must correct you there,” interrupted Kent with a smile. “As a reader of detective stories you are making the mistake of confusing fiction with reality. It is the

customary privilege of the story detective to make jibes at the official police in order that his own wonderful genius may show up in sharper contrast. But there are many such liberties taken in a piece of fiction. There is a vast difference between the work of the Master Detective of the story pages and the detective in real life; the former finds the tiny clues and makes his amazing deductions and solves his problem because the author has planned carefully to have him do so, but the detective in real life has to rely upon honesty, obedience and leg work, well mixed with common sense, and then trust largely to good luck. Lieutenant Fargey no doubt has his limitations; he is only a human being with no guarantee of infallibility. But he has the reputation of being a hard worker and a man who is thoroughly posted in his work."

Roger Levering had listened to this speech with great interest and a growing astonishment.

"But I thought—You yourself as the creator of such clever tales, Mr. Kent—surely you would be able to bring to actual detective work a superior power of deduction and induction—Do I understand you to infer that in a real mystery such as this that seems to surround the killing of poor Radcliffe, you—at least you would not make stupid blunders—"

"I might—some very stupid ones perhaps."

"You amaze me."

"My 'Professor Crate' character does not make half the fun of the official police that the official police make of him, I am afraid," laughed Kent. "He is really impossible, my dear Levering. Ask Bob Fargey. Ask Fargey

what he thinks of 'Sherlock Holmes', Gaboriau's 'Lecoq' or Poe's 'Dupin'; he's probably read a lot of the detective tales available. Of course, I am not arguing that the fiction detective with the abnormal gifts has not his legitimate place—in stories; he is a standard type which the public accepts, even expects. But you make a mistake if you attempt to place him outside the printed page and confuse him with your real detective from the Central Office."

"I understand what you mean," nodded Levering. "Then you yourself as the creator of one of those characters with abnormal powers as a detective are yourself unable to apply those powers on a real case?"

"I leave it to your own common sense to answer that. If you told me that John Smith had just been robbed of a million dollars, I am very doubtful if I could walk around the nearest corner and arrest the first man I met just because he had a mole on his right cheek and had a bit of clay adhering to his left heel. No matter how many moles the robber had or whether the money had been dug out of a claybank, I could never land the culprit that way."

"How would Fargey go about it, then?" smiled Levering.

"He'd probably go first to the Rogue's Gallery and the whole machinery of the police system all over the country would be set in motion to run down every crook whose record made him a 'prospect' for a job of the kind in hand. He would have to trust to chance to a large extent. He certainly wouldn't start out, carefully dis-

guised in a bunch of whiskers, to trail every man he met with a mole on his right cheek and mud on his boots!"

"Fargey is a man of reputation, you say?"

"Yes. I believe he is a first-class detective. But you understand, of course, that even a Central Office man who stands high may make mistakes—plenty of them. It is a business which must be learned like other businesses, by experience, and I would not say that the average detective was mentally any keener than—the average chauffeur, let us say. You have no more right to expect any greater brain power in an ordinary detective in real life than you would expect from a fireman or a plumber or a clerk in an office."

Roger Levering heaved a breath of relief.

"I am glad to hear you say that, Mr. Kent, yet—I don't know, after all, that it—Listen. I am going to tell you something in confidence which by no means must you repeat to a soul. I do not know whether you can help me or not; but you are the only man in this house whom I care to consult on what you will recognize at once is a delicate situation—for me."

"Your confidence will be respected, Mr. Levering."

"Thanks. Then—" He drew a big breath like a man taking a plunge into deep water. "I must tell you that Fargey has discovered a clue to the—what happened last night—that is likely to result in grave consequences. He has told you perhaps about the missing shirt-cuff—?"

"Yes."

"And the gold pencil that was clutched in Radcliffe's hand?"

"Yes."

"And the broken chain that belonged to it— Has he told you where it was found?"

"Yes."

"The pencil belongs to my aunt, Mr. Kent."

"So I believe."

"She lost it but I happened to find it yesterday morning and returned it to her. She says she left it on the dresser in her bedroom and that she missed it again for the first time this morning. She says she wasn't outside her own room last night." He got to his feet and paced about in sudden agitation.

Kent watched him intently, waiting quietly for him to recover his equanimity and not a little interested in what might follow.

"Yes?" he prompted at length.

"Fargey seems to attach great importance to this gold pencil and the fact that the chain was found beneath the fire-escape. He has not told me much, of course, but I strongly suspect that he does not believe the truth of what Mrs. Saint-Anton has told him."

"That is his privilege, of course," nodded Kent. "But it does not follow that he is at all justified. What possible object could your aunt have in trying to deceive him?"

"That's the very point!" muttered Levering as he again took a turn across the room and back. Kent noted that his hands were clenched.

"You mean—she had an object?"

"Yes." He stopped directly in front of Addison Kent.

"My aunt—I am afraid—for her," he said in a hollow voice.

He clutched the novelist's arm and Kent could feel the tremble of his fingers.

"I am afraid that she was not in her room every minute of last night," he whispered hoarsely. "I am afraid that she—that Fargey may be—right!" He sank into the chair and buried his face in his hands.

Kent stared at him in silence, tense and alert.

CHAPTER XI

AN EYE IN THE DARK

HE leaned over and touched Roger Levering's shoulder.

"Come, come, Levering, this thing's getting on your nerves, man. Your fears are not logical at all—unless you have some knowledge which you are withholding. Perhaps if you tell me all you can about your aunt and her relation to Henry Radcliffe I may be able to set your mind at ease."

There was not much to be said in this connection apparently. Mrs. Saint-Anton had not confided in her nephew in regard to Henry Radcliffe, except to say that he was an old-time acquaintance whom she had met first in France. Levering went on to explain that until recently he and his aunt had been comparative strangers as she had travelled a great deal on the Continent while he had grown up in somewhat hap-hazard fashion as a lazy sort of dog who took life rather easy. His father had been a barrister in Dublin, he said, and had spoiled him by giving him a good education and plenty of spending money. His roving spirit and association with certain scions of the British aristocracy at Oxford had led him into several hunting trips in Africa and South America and it was not until the unexpected death of

his father that he learned he was practically penniless. A letter had reached him from his father's sister, whom he had seen but seldom, inviting him to join her on the Riviera. The visit had proved preliminary to Mrs. Saint-Anton's proposal that he accompany her on a trip to America, as a sort of escort, and he had accepted it at once. His aunt wished to visit several friends and some of these had met them when the liner from Cherbourg had docked in New York harbor. Since then they had visited the principal watering places, his aunt's chief concern apparently being to have an enjoyable time. She was alone in the world and as her husband had left her with a large annual income she was in a position to go and come as she might choose. -

"Has your aunt said nothing which would throw any light upon your visit to Hillerest?" asked Kent, not without surprise.

"Very little. Beyond the fact that she spoke of Mr. Radcliffe as an old friend, I know nothing. She told me how wealthy he was and how beautiful his daughter—" He stopped in some confusion.

"I see," nodded Kent. "And you were to make yourself agreeable and—who could tell what might happen, eh?"

Roger Levering shifted restlessly in his chair.

"I would rather not discuss that, if you please," he protested. "I am not altogether dull, Kent. I have sensed that I was not very welcome here and have been anxious to get away. I have felt that my aunt's presumption was altogether unwarranted. I trust that you will credit me with that."

"If you know nothing of your aunt's past relations with Mr. Radcliffe, what makes you jump so readily to your conclusions?" demanded Kent bluntly. "Without some reason they are utterly foolish. Did you see her outside her room during the night?"

"No."

"Then why do you think she may not be telling the truth? Was there any apparent ill feeling between her and Mr. Radcliffe?"

Levering hesitated and wet his lips.

"There have been times when I—thought perhaps there was," he admitted uncomfortably. "I have seen Mr. Radcliffe looking at her somewhat strangely, I thought, and once or twice I happened upon them when there appeared to be a decided coolness between them. I thought at first it might have to do with my aunt's match-making tendencies; but now I am not sure but it may have been deeper than that."

"Even that suspicion does not justify your present fears, Mr. Levering," said Kent with a note of severity in his voice. "You are evidently upset by what's happened and are giving your imagination too free a rein."

"I hope you are right, old chap. You understand that all this is in strict confidence. This Fargey seems so sure of himself that it has made me realize my position very keenly. I feel a lot better for having had this talk with you. I want to get this situation cleared up as quickly as possible. I am going to have a frank talk with my aunt; it will probably mean a bit of a row, you know, for she has a temper of her own. I want to help, though, in every way I can."

"Of course," murmured Kent as he stood up and reached for his coat.

He stepped past Levering's chair and in the act of thrusting his arm through the sleeve one of his fingers swept across the other's face and knocked his glasses upward into his hair where for a brief instant they hung in jeopardy before their startled owner could grab for them, adjusting them once more behind his ears.

"Oh, I say!" cried Roger Levering, springing to his feet. His face flushed angrily.

"Great Scott! Are they broken?" gasped Kent in dismay. "How infernally careless of me! I beg your pardon, old man. It was an accident. If they had been broken I could never forgive myself." He heaved a breath of relief, his manner one of abject apology and concern.

"They're all right. Ac—accidents will happen, old chap," murmured Levering, dismissing the incident with a hasty wave of one hand. "See you at dinner, Kent." He expressed his gratitude once more for the interview as he unlocked the door and smiled pleasantly as he bowed his visitor out.

On his way to his own room Kent, leaning over the bannister, saw Detective-Sergeant Hayes in the hall below and whistled softly to attract his attention. In answer to his beckoning finger, Hayes came quietly upstairs and followed into the suite of rooms to which Kent had been assigned.

"You are to be in charge here to-night, Sergeant, I believe."

"Yes, sir," he saluted. "Loot'nant Fargey has just given me the word."

"The grounds will be picketted, of course?"

"That is the intention, Mr. Kent. I have 'phoned headquarters for a squad of patrolmen to report for night duty and I have several plainclothes men besides."

"Good. I believe it may be of importance to keep a sharp lookout to-night. No special liberties are being allowed anyone, I suppose?"

"The orders are strict, sir. Nobody is allowed to leave."

"Not even me?" smiled Kent.

"Oh, yes,—you, of course, sir," grinned the sergeant. "And Mr. Traynor. The orders refer to the servants."

"And Mrs. Saint-Anton?"

"Queen high, Mr. Kent," and Sergeant Hayes drooped an eyelid. It was evident that he shared the confidence of his chief to a high degree.

"In drawing to the queen, Sergeant, be careful not to discard the jack."

Detective-Sergeant Hayes was bright. His response to this cryptic warning was another slow wink to signify appreciation of the fact that nephews and aunts were close relations.

"About this missing shirt-cuff, Hayes—," Kent continued, "just how thoroughly have you searched?"

"High and low, sir. We've been through every room in the house, garages and stables, tool-house, and every part of the grounds. Everything has been turned inside out."

"Much to everyone's annoyance no doubt. The lady guest was annoyed very likely. Was she, Hayes?"

"Very much, Mr. Kent. But we can't help that."

"No, of course not. All right, Sergeant. If anything interesting crops up, you might let me know. I'll be up late most likely; but don't hesitate to wake me if you happen to need me after I've turned in."

For a few moments after Detective-Sergeant Hayes had taken his departure Addison Kent stood at the window of his room, his hands in his pockets, lost in thought. Once or twice he shook his head slowly and at last he smiled faintly as if in skepticism of his own speculations.

"Well, 'we'll see—what we'll see.' That's one wise remark that can be accepted anyway and by the time—"

For a moment he stared vacantly at the object which his hand had idly withdrawn from his pocket; then his thoughts focused upon it—the master key which Traynor had obtained for him from Miss Radcliffe at his request. It was her own private key and it would admit him practically to any room in the house. He smiled at the responsibility its possession entailed and tossing it on top of the cheffonier, proceeded leisurely to dress for dinner.

In the bathroom, drying his hands upon a towel, his thoughts turned to the convenience of all the appointments in this house of luxury. Although it was such a large place, the clever architect had designed a use for every corner of space; thus, the bathrooms of the

various guest suites were let into the wall at one end of the large clothes closets—

Kent dropped the towel abruptly and came out into the sitting-room to study the layout more closely. Yes, it was the same as the suite Levering occupied; there would be uniformity of design in all the guest chambers likely. Then, why was there no clothes-closet in the rooms which Henry Radcliffe had occupied? None of the other suites had a huge wardrobe or any alcove—

He went to the window and gazed out again, this time with seeing eyes, noting that the wing where the servants were quartered was of much more recent construction than the rest of the house; the masonry was new, the whole wing unweathered. There was a certain impression of newness about these guest rooms, too,—as if extensive alterations had been made in the house proper at the time the new servant's wing had been added.

Kent began to whistle a little soundless tune to himself as he slipped on his coat and reached for Miss Radcliffe's key. He glanced at his watch. Nobody was in sight in the hallway and he moved quietly along to the door of the late Mr. Radcliffe's apartment and let himself in. It was the same as the suite he had just left except for the lack of a clothes-closet in the bedroom and the addition of the alcove off the sitting-room.

Kent studied the partitioning of the room with particular care. The alcove was wide but not deep; the big cherrywood wardrobe that was built in at the back across the full width required most of the space. He opened all the doors and stood back, chin in hand, then

turned on his heel and went into the outer hall for a glance at the relative distances between the various doors that opened upon the passage from the neighboring rooms. Satisfied, he returned to the alcove, carefully locking the door that gave entrance to the suite, and took from his pocket a small flat flashlight.

With this thrust inside the wardrobe he patiently explored the woodwork, running his hand over every inch of it, feeling every edge with which his fingers came in contact. He dusted his knees at last with an ejaculation of disappointment; yet he was sure he was right. The measurements at the back of the thing were abnormal, even allowing for a bulky solidity; besides, when he tapped gently— He stepped inside, shoving away the hangers on their sliding rod, and found that he could stand upright; he could even move sideways behind the clothes—

There was a slight click beneath his advancing foot. The little disk of light revealed the centre panel sliding noiselessly into a hidden recess, cunningly provided for it; through the aperture the thin ray from his tiny torch penetrated the dark. He turned it to the floor and without hesitation stepped through the back of the wardrobe, finding himself in a small compartment where the air hung heavy like that of a catacomb. There appeared to be no opening of any kind in the four walls but presently the tiny investigating ray of light revealed the beginning of a staircase not ten feet in front of him.

With elation Kent sent the thin beam of light dancing upward. His calculations had been correct. This was

evidently a section of what had been a back stairway for the use of the servants. The passage had been swallowed completely in the alterations after the new wing had been built—all but this portion which, for some reason of his own, Henry Radcliffe had chosen to leave as a secret exit from his own quarters.

A dozen questions crowded on the heels of the discovery. Where did it lead to? How many people in that house of tragedy knew of this secret stair? Had the murderer used it to gain entrance and exit to the dead man's rooms? Had the ghost—?

He released his finger from the button of the flashlight and as he stood there in utter blackness Kent listened with bated breath. Some sixth sense seemed to warn him that he was not alone, even while his reason told him that it was folly to think otherwise.

Suddenly his muscles tautened and every nerve thrilled in spite of himself. A long sigh reached his ears, which were straining for sound. It was followed by a low, piteous moan that ended in a half-choked sob. There was no mistake about it; for the sobbing was repeated. Even after it ceased, which it did in a few moments, Kent stood motionless in his tracks, seeking the direction of the sounds; but in those cramped quarters there was little room for direction and the sound seemed to come from all sides at once.

Suddenly he started and his hand went quickly to his hip where he carried his police automatic. From the top of the stair something was looking down at him—like a cyclops whose single eye stared balefully downward in

the dark. The sobbing had not been renewed; not a sound reached him as he stood there.

He pressed the button of the light, holding it well away from him and throwing the thin beam upward. There was nothing standing or creeping upon the stair from top to bottom—not a thing. Yet when he extinguished the ray, the eye still regarded him with silent menace.

Kent laughed at himself. The sounds, of course, must come from the rooms adjoining this passage on one side or the other. The passage was flanked by the room he had just quitted, Henry Radcliffe's bedroom, on the left; on the right—Mrs. Saint-Anton, to be sure. It was Mrs. Saint-Anton, then, who was indulging in emotion in the secrecy of her own room.

He noted as he advanced that the treads of the stair were padded to allow of silent negotiation. Very carefully he ascended, directing his ray of light at the spot where he had imagined—

Kent smiled again as he reached it and ran his fingers over it tentatively. With the light out they glowed, faintly luminous.

"A daub of luminous paint, forsooth!" he mused with interest.

It was on the wainscotting, directly at the head of the steps. He fumbled about for several minutes before he located the right point of pressure and had the satisfaction of seeing a panel open. He held back as the daylight came through and stuck his head out very cautiously before venturing to advance.

He found himself now in what seemed to be a trunk room and general storeroom. Trunks, suitcases and various other articles were arranged neatly against the walls; near the door on the far side was a badly-scarred steamer-trunk, covered with hotel labels. He tip-toed across the little room to the door and found it locked; but it yielded to his key and he slowly opened it. It gave on the third-floor hallway. A few yards away the main staircase descended.

Kent's watch told him it was time to be moving and after relocking the door he retraced his steps. As he thrust a foot through the opening in the wall his eye noted something upon which he pounced with a mutter of satisfaction. He closed the panel quickly and descended the secret stairway, his mind busy. He lost no time in regaining his own room, leaving everything behind him as he found it. He was sure that he had succeeded in avoiding observation and his eyes were alight as he dressed hastily.

"Somebody claims that heaven is a Picadilly sort of place—spiritual cigars, top hats and all the rest of it!" He grinned at his reflection in the glass as he applied his military brushes. "I wonder if Levering believes that the lady ghosts go in for cigarettes or what!"

He felt in his pocket and with whimsical amusement, eyed the little object he had picked up.

"The Hillcrest servants must be a very careless lot," he nodded.

It was another of those flat, yellow, cardboard matches.

CHAPTER XII

A MAN WHO CALLS HIMSELF "ALCESTE"

UP in the rooms occupied by Mr. Thomas Traynor two after-dinner cigars glowed in the semi-darkness. It was the first opportunity of a quiet smoke together that the two friends had had since they had reached Hillcrest that afternoon and both Kent and Traynor were enjoying the relaxation. Long association with one another had established that mutual understanding which enables old friends to discard the burden of making conversation for the mere sake of appearing sociable; there is a silence more eloquent of true companionship than the liveliest repartee.

Dinner had not been a cheerful function and everybody at the table had been glad when it was over. Miss Radcliffe had done her utmost to banish the spectre of Tragedy; but in spite of her bravery, the strain under which she was laboring was apparent to her sympathetic guests. The purpose of their presence as guests obtruded in spite of the carefully directed trend of the conversation and a certain restraint seemed to have settled down upon the whole household with the arrival of the police on the scene. Roger Levering maintained a politely melancholy mood; Traynor and Kent had been more or less pre-occupied; even Lieutenant Fargey had

sensed the general depression and devoted himself almost exclusively to the food set before him; the servants came and went with silent efficiency. Mr. Armaund Lamont alone exhibited any degree of vivacity and at last he had reached the limit of his ability as a monologist. Mrs. Saint-Anton had elected to remain in her own room and did not put in an appearance.

If Addison Kent had been disappointed at not meeting the visitor in whom his interest was aroused, he gave no hint of it. He had managed to have a few moments alone with his hostess, and during their confidential chat discovered that she knew nothing of the hidden stair. The alterations had been made and the new wing built while she was away for the summer in the Adirondacks. Their butler had given notice a short time before and Mrs. Stanton had acted as stewardess for several months, taking full charge of what servants had been left on the premises. Why did he ask?

Kent professed mere architectural interest in the house. There was nothing to be gained in adding to Miss Radcliffe's perplexities and he had decided to keep secret for the time being what he had discovered. He excused himself, therefore, and sought out the seamstress who had been ordered by Lieutenant Fargey to remain at Hillcrest for the night, instead of returning to the cottage where she usually slept.

Without revealing his purpose in questioning her, Kent soon came to the conclusion that Mrs. Stanton could throw no light upon the situation. It was apparent that she worshipped the very ground the charming mistress

of Hillcrest trod upon, and to one of her years the shock of events had been severe. Kent felt sorry for her without quite knowing why unless it was the wistful appeal of her faded face and saddened eyes; as Miss Radcliffe had told Traynor, the seamstress at Hillcrest was a woman of education and refinement above her present station and one always feels a certain pity for those whose education has but served to sharpen the arrowheads of misfortune.

Mrs. Stanton was able to tell him, however, that the late master of Hillcrest had given personal supervision to the alterations in the house. This seemed to point to the probability that he had planned the secret exit from his room deliberately, though what his object was in so doing was a matter for wide speculation. It may have been only a whim. A pretty expensive one, thought Kent soberly; for there seemed little reason to doubt that the secret stair had played some part in last night's tragedy. Whoever had gained entrance to Henry Radcliffe's rooms through the hidden passage had done so during the night and had carried no light to announce approach, but had relied upon the little cardboard matches for an occasional flare to light the way.

Mr. Armaund Lamont, the Fifth Avenue jewel merchant, had taken a run over to Long Island for the weekend, but caught the first train back to the city when the news of what had happened at Hillcrest reached him. He had called up Traynor on the 'phone to learn if there was anything he could do and to express his deep sympathy for Rose in her distressing bereavement. In

response to Tommy's suggestion that he come out to Westchester, he had ordered his chauffeur to bring around the limousine at once and had lost no time in making the call.

For an hour or more he had discussed the situation with Traynor and Miss Radcliffe, giving his best advice in regard to her father's valuable collection of gems. Rose had been grateful for the information he was able to impart; as a friend of her father's he was very familiar with the Radcliffe collection and her father's wishes in regard to it. He had consented at once to take charge of the collar of pearls and remove it to a place of safety. Traynor had left him after dinner, arranging with Lieutenant Fargey for one of the detectives to accompany him in the car back to town as a bodyguard.

"You ought to have seen Lamont's face when I told him about that fake appointment in town this morning," mused Traynor aloud. "At first he thought I was kidding him, then he went right up in the air and swears he'll fire everybody in the office from Baker down if they've dared to put up such a joke on me."

Kent continued to stare out the window at the moonlit vista of shrubbery, lawn and flowerbeds, but offered no comment.

"If it was intended as a practical joke it was very much out of place in view of what's happened since," Traynor went on. "If it wasn't a joke, what possible object could anyone have—?"

"You are wasting energy, Tommy, on what can be but a paragraph, a sentence, a phrase in the book of mystery which we seek to read."

"A whole book of it! I knew you'd agree with me. What chapter are you at—? But you haven't had time to more than look at the binding," laughed Traynor, toying with the metaphor.

"The leaves are still uncut—most of them," admitted Kent. "But it looks interesting. The story will start to-morrow morning with the inquest at ten o'clock—and I have every expectation that that part of it at least will prove very hackneyed."

"You do not expect any new evidence?"

"Possibly. But I doubt it. However, it will serve to assemble the situation on a working basis."

"What are the police doing?"

"Standing pat—and searching everywhere for that missing shirt-cuff."

"Is it so very important?"

"Undoubtedly. But it was removed most likely for the purpose of destroying it. If it were incriminating it would hardly be left about for the police to find. Tell me, Tommy—You are quite certain that it was a man's face which looked in at your window from the fire-escape?"

"I'm positive it was," Traynor replied without hesitation.

"And you are equally positive that the thing you saw on the staircase was a woman?"

"It had a woman's figure—yes."

"And came down from the third floor, I believe you said?"

"Yes. It was swathed in draperies and glowed in the

dark—It's darned queer, that. If somebody were playing ghost how would they get that wierd glow? I happen to know that the druggists handle phosphorous mighty carefully; it would burn the skin off."

"There is a luminous paint on the market that does not contain phosphorous in any form, yet would achieve the effect. Undoubtedly that was what was used."

"You don't share Levering's belief in spirits, then?"

"I am not at all sure that he does believe in genuine phantasms."

"The devil you say!" exclaimed Traynor. "You mean—?"

"I am more interested in the genuineness of the fright the apparition gave him. No doubt about that, I suppose?"

"No. He was scared half out of his boots."

"Keep to the facts, Tommy," smiled Kent. "He was in his stocking-feet, remember."

"You have formed some theory, old man. What is it?"

"Theorizing is the most useless thing we can do, Tommy," protested Kent. "It is too early for that sort of thing—until all the facts are in front of us. You were right, however, in predicting that this case is going to require our best efforts. There is something more in it than murder incidental to theft—"

Kent had turned towards Traynor as he talked, but the speech remained unfinished as Traynor clutched his arm in sudden excitement.

"Look!" he gasped. "The window!—the face!"

Kent jerked about in his chair just in time to get a passing glimpse of a face at the lattice. It was not much more than a flash of pallor in the moonlight before it vanished.

With an inarticulate sound in his throat Traynor leaped across the room with Kent at his heels. As they reached the window pell-mell they recoiled involuntarily at sight of two shadowy bulks on the fire-escape, crowding out the light. Came the gruff, dictatorial voice of Lieutenant Robert Fargey.

"Hey, you fellows! Mr. Lamont and I are comin' in. Go ahead, sir."

"Why, come right in, gentlemen. We were sitting here in the dark, finishing our cigars— Just a minute till I switch on the light." As he crossed the room, Kent seized Traynor by the arm with a warning squeeze. "Control yourself, man!" he whispered tensely.

Mr. Armaund Lamont's snappy dark eyes danced from one to the other and his even teeth gleamed whitely beneath his black moustache in an ingratiating smile.

"We are intruding, gentlemen—yes?"

"Not at all, Mr. Lamont," Traynor assured his employer. "You'll find this chair more comfortable. But you startled us, coming in through the window; we didn't hear you on the fire-escape."

The Frenchman chuckled as he settled his stout, well-groomed body into the chair and proffered his monogrammed cigar-case. Lieutenant Fargey had just been showing him around, he said. He had examined the safe in the library and had seen the room where the shooting

took place. No less strange than sad, that! While inspecting the fire-escape they had heard voices and the Lieutenant had seemed anxious to join them.

"Mr. Lamont here has been telling me some mighty interesting things I didn't know about jewelry, Kent. Thought perhaps you might like to hear some of it," Fargey explained.

His face still retained a trace of the animation with which he had listened to the conversation of the expert upon the subject that had been a life study. It was a good opportunity for Fargey to post himself and he had been taking advantage of it.

The diamond ring on the little finger of Armaund Lamont's plump, white hand flashed with his gesture of deprecation. For the next five minutes they listened in absorption while he concluded his dissertation upon the excavations of the British Museum in the ancient graves near Salamis in Cyprus and discussed the gems found in Etruscan and Roman ornaments. Both Kent and Traynor were qualified to ask intelligent questions on these matters and to comment upon the development of the goldsmith's art and soon Lamont's eyes were alight with the enthusiasm of a connoisseur.

The conversation became studded with diadems and necklaces of strange words quite beyond the depth of an ordinary lieutenant of detectives. Fargey was not sure whether lapis lazuli was a serviette which the ancient princesses spread upon their bare knees between dances, while they sipped their wine in the cabarets of Dahshur, or whether it was one of the seven veils which they dis-

carded when they did a "shimmy" dance before the king! For all he knew vitreous paste might be the favorite dentifrice of the mummies! A pair of sirens, repoussé, telling each other the latest fibulae they'd picked up in the streets of Cameiros or a fourth-century horse with wings on it, having a feed of oats in a godforsaken temple at Tunis—it was all Greek to Fargey! But he floundered along in the rear of the conversation all the way from the sarcophagus of Queen Aah-hotp (who admired herself about 1400 B.C., in spite of her name!) down to the exhibits of René Lalique in the Salon of 1895 and the activities of A. Lamont, New York, United States. On the way the discussion drifted over to Enkomi, wherever that was, and had a pleasant time going through the cemetery there, afterwards travelling to various interesting points in Egypt, Chaldea, and the Far East; the archaic temple of Artemis at Ephesus was visited and at last the talk arrived in Europe and took in the jewelry factories in Paris, Vienna, London and Birmingham, reaching home at last somewhat tired out but happy!

"Home", for Fargey in this connection, meant the subject of artificial gems, faking of famous jewelry, sensational robberies by notorious jewel thieves and so forth. It was a remark of Kent's that turned the conversation at last into these channels and Lieutenant Fargey awoke all at once to the suspicion that Addison Kent had been directing the jewelry expert in such a way as to lead up to this very climax, but so subtly as to hide the intention.

"Tell them about that chap who has been cutting loose lately across the pond, Chief," suggested Traynor. "You know who I mean."

Mr. Armaund Lamont either did not hear or chose to ignore the remark. He continued to address himself to Kent, in further explanation of cleavages in crystallized gem-stones and flaws in the cut stones. Then he hurried on to speak of the color upon which the beauty and value of many gems depended mainly. Some stones were exceptions, of course—the diamond, for instance; the less color it exhibited, the more "water clear" it was, the higher the value. It was this which made the diamond necklace which had been stolen from the Radcliffe safe so very valuable. Why Henry Radcliffe had risked the two finest pieces in his collection just to have them where he could look at them when he pleased—But then, when one has so much money and worships beauty with the understanding eye, one does not think of risks. Assuredly not.

Pardon? But yes, the collar of pearls was of great value also. Such size and uniformity! Such "skin"! Such "orient"! No finer pearls had come from the Persian Gulf, off the islands of Bahrein. The Frenchman's eyes gleamed as he spoke of their lustre and freedom from flaws. He had offered much money to Henry Radcliffe for this precious possession; but *pouf!* what was money one did not need compared to ownership of such pearls!

"If that cracksman could hear you, Chief, those pearls would be as good as gone," laughed Tommy Traynor.

Lamont frowned at his advertising manager and gestured impatiently.

"By any chance, are you referring to a man who calls himself 'Alceste'?" Kent's question was intended for Traynor; but it was Armaund Lamont at whom he looked as he spoke.

"Ah! You have heard, my friend. And how did you know?"

"Oh, there's an old acquaintance of mine over in London—a Scotland Yard superintendent," smiled Kent. "He keeps me posted more or less on what's going on."

"Scotland Yard, yes. They would know," murmured Lamont as if talking to himself. "My hat is no longer on my head when you speak of Scotland Yard, Mr. Kent, is it not? What they do not know they find out. . . A dangerous thief, this Alceste. We have been—warned."

"By Scotland Yard?" enquired Kent with interest.

"In Paris the police quite well know him also." He shook his head. "All over Europe, I guess, they know that rascal. But do they ever catch him? *Mon dieu*, no! He is here—there—nowhere! Jewels, rarest of gems, always the precious stones that he takes and nothing else! He knows the fine ones—always the very finest he takes. The police run after him like hens after food. But he is always—gone! He has wings! He sinks under water! He buries himself in the earth! He is *le diable!*"

"A highly entertaining individual," commented Kent, gazing with some amusement at the excited Frenchman.

"It was he, this Alceste, who walked into the Hermitage Palace in St. Petersburg and removed the famous Princess ruby from one of the early ivories—in broad

daylight, with the noses of the guards right over it! You heard of that, perhaps, Mr. Kent? Later he came back and restored it to its place on the breast of the ivory goddess and —*Voilà!* he was gone! There was so fine a fuss! For why? It was not the Princess ruby at all — just a doublet with a slab of real gem-stone on top to cover the paste beneath! Truly, a dangerous thief, my friend!"

"The gentleman is a humorist," smiled Kent. "Alceste! What a name to travel under! the name of the hero in Moliere's *Misanthrope*—an enemy of social hypocrisies! But sooner or later he will be captured like all the rest of them—"

"Pardon, Mr. Kent," interrupted Armaund Lamont with a negative shake of his large head, "the police will never catch this Alceste. He is *le diable!* He strikes, he disappears, he is dead, he is forgotten; then when least expected—*Voici!* he is alive, he takes what he wants and is gone again!"

"Well all I gotta say is he better not go tryin' to pull any o' that stuff over here," declared Fargey boastfully. "We'd put a crimp in him inside forty-eight hours if he showed his nose in this burg!" He laughed as he scratched a match to relight his cigar.

Armaund Lamont regarded the lieutenant of detectives in silence. He shook his head doubtfully at last and smiled a little uncertainly.

"My friend," he whispered in a slow, impressive way, one fat white finger upraised, "this Alceste — he is already here!"

CHAPTER XIII

"GUARD WELL YOUR TONGUE"

A SUDDEN silence had possession of the group. The jeweler had spoken with the conviction of one who asserts a fact, not as one who expresses an opinion merely. The match in Fargey's fingers burned on unheeded until at last he threw it down with irritation.

"Go on. Spring it. I'll be the goat. What's the joke, Mr. Lamont?" he urged.

"One does not joke upon a so serious matter, Mr. Fargey," was the sober reply.

"You are sure, Chief?" asked Tommy Traynor in disbelief. "What's happened to make you think that?"

Addison Kent alone seemed to have accepted the startling statement without question. He nodded his head in thoughtful approval.

"You see certain indications of this particular crook's handiwork, then, in the jewel thefts of the past week, Mr. Lamont. May I ask just what these are?"

"Organization—deliberate preparation, Mr. Kent,—a certain finish in the execution of the actual robberies and complete obliteration of all clues. Come, my Lieutenant, you will admit that the police are—how do you say it?—up in the atmosphere! I have talked with your

Commissioner about it. We have had a delegation to him from our Association and the insurance people are not easy minded—nervous over what may happen, surmounting what already has happened.”

“And what is it that may happen, Mr. Lamont?” asked Kent quietly.

“Anything! Everything!” cried Armaund Lamont in sudden agitation. “I tell you, this man Alceste—he is the very *diable* himself! He will come and take as he pleases—in spite of all the precautions in our vaults! Burglar-alarm systems are nothing to him; he knows every surprise! He could rob the government mint itself if he wanted money; but it is the rare gems—always the rarest of the gems he comes to take. Wait and see!”

“But you are not sure that Alceste is even contemplating a trip to America—,” Traynor began.

“He is here. I know it because I feel it in my marrows, Tommy. Last Wednesday he got the Van Tuyl lavalliere in Chicago. We have secret reports. Last night it was the Radcliffe diamonds. To-morrow he may be in Philadelphia. To-morrow—Ah, *mon dieu!* we can not tell what next!”

“You think—he was here?—at Hillcrest?” gasped Traynor in amazement.

Lieutenant Robert Fargey’s eyes were glittering with a subdued excitement. He saw great headlines in the newspapers all over North America—London, Paris, Vienna—all over the world and his head felt hot; his fingers twitched. What a catch! What a catch!

"From what you say, this 'Alceste' is spectacular," came the even tones of Addison Kent. "I would judge, Mr. Lamont, that he would be bold enough to come right here among us, if necessary,—in this very room, say—and tell us how very impossible it was for the police or anyone else to capture a master thief by the name of 'Alceste'!"

The laugh which greeted this bit of foolishness relieved the tension. Kent joined in heartily; so did Armaund Lamont. Afterward he stole a glance at the novelist once or twice as if he searched for innuendo without discovering anything to justify the suspicion. These writers—one could never be sure when they were laughing!

"He'd make a good character for your next novel, Ad," said Traynor.

"That's where he would seem to belong—in a story book," smiled Kent. "If the police can't lay hands on him it is time to call in a gumshoe expert with a large magnifying-glass and a false moustache!"

"The police will never catch Alceste," repeated Lamont. "They have the men, the system; they are fine—our police, yes. It is that they lack the imagination, is it not?"

"Well," growled Fargey, tossing his cigar-end out the window and getting to his feet, "sittin' here, workin' imagination overtime aint going to get us anywheres. I'm going home to hit the hay. Whenever you're ready, Mr. Lamont, Detective McVey will ride in with you. I'm leaving Sergeant Hayes in charge, Tommy. Goodnight,

Mr. Kent. If the ghost shows up, give her my compliments." He grinned as he waved a hand from the doorway.

"If you see Alceste hanging around anywhere, Bob," called Traynor, "you'll arrest him, of course?"

"Does a duck swim?"

"Not on dry land."

But Lieutenant Fargey closed the door and was gone.

"I think if you will excuse me, gentlemen," said Armaund Lamont presently, glancing at his watch, "I will be going also. It is not well to be too late when one carries—responsibilities."

After the jeweler had bowed himself out, Traynor closed the door and locked it. He stepped across to the window and closed it also. Then he looked at Addison Kent who was lighting his pipe, eyes crinkling with amusement.

"I believe you are getting nervous, Tommy." Traynor said nothing but threw himself into the chair Lamont had vacated and frowned at the floor. "You did not see who it was that looked in at the window. You can not even tell me that there was any resemblance to the face last night. You were merely startled for a moment at seeing a face looking in when you were not expecting anything of the kind—a face in the moonlight. Am I right?"

"Yes. It—must have been that—just that I was startled. Any other idea of it would be too—utterly ridiculous."

"Exactly. Secretly you have been entertaining the

hypothesis that the face at your window last night was the face of the murderer—because the shot was fired from outside Mr. Radcliffe's room. But can you give me any good reason why it could not have come from some distance outside the room—say a couple of hundred yards? Some automatic pistols are sighted up to a thousand yards. For all you know to the contrary, the murderer may have climbed a tree nearby and fired from there. The fact that nobody heard the shot would even seem to favor this idea, wouldn't it?"

"I hadn't thought of that," nodded Traynor. "Then you believe—?"

"I did not say so," interrupted Kent. "I am merely presenting two possibilities to ease your mind—either that the whole thing was part of a nightmare and there was no face looking in at your window at all—"

"I won't admit that."

"At any rate, there can be no resemblance—You surely don't suspect Bob Fargey of having anything to do with the killing?"

"You are kidding me, Ad."

"As for your worthy boss—come to think of it, though, what do you know about his early life in France?—before he came over to the United States?"

"Great Scott! you are not trying to make me believe anything against Lamont, are you?" cried Traynor with a touch of resentment in his tone. "He's white clean through, a prince—!"

"Then quit worrying over foolishness and go to bed,

Tommy." Kent laughed and stood up, yawning behind his hand.

"The chief certainly has a very great respect for this wonderful cracksman he was telling about, hasn't he? I suppose, though, he was exaggerating—"

"Not as much as you might think. Lamont, of course, is influenced by his own apprehensions and he is ready to believe that there is no limit to Alceste's powers. Nevertheless, Alceste really is perhaps the smoothest crook loose at the present time. The fact that Scotland Yard has failed at every turn, as well as the best detectives in Europe, proves that he is a very accomplished gentleman."

"Do you put any stock in the chief's idea that he is operating over here—had a hand in this affair last night?"

"I think it is quite within the possibilities." Kent's face had grown thoughtful. "I was about to remark that I had come to some such conclusion when we were interrupted. The solution to this mystery lies much deeper than surface indications, Tommy. Beyond doubt the thing was planned carefully in advance. The occurrence of these other jewel thefts indicates that a regular campaign is being followed as there are certain similarities that point to them all as the work of the same directing mind. All of them exhibit systematic cunning of conception, carried through without a hitch and without leaving a single clue behind. The only thing that seems to be established in each case is that the gems have vanished."

Traynor moved over to the door, opened it and glanced out into the hall. He relocked it and came close to Kent.

"Is it possible that the man is in this house—now?" he asked in an excited whisper. "Anything is possible—even that."

"Well? Let me have your reasons for thinking so, Tommy. You won't get a wink of sleep without cleaning your mind of disturbing suspicions. Whom do you suspect?"

"There is one man here who is a stranger—"

"I thought so. You have had a dislike for Levering from the first. Neither he nor his aunt have been welcome guests here because both Miss Radcliffe and her father have sensed the fact that they are fortune hunters. But you are overlooking the possibility that Levering himself is not to blame for this visit; he was brought here by his match-making aunt. He is well educated and extremely sensitive; he admitted to me this afternoon that he had been very angry at his aunt for coming here at all. Be fair, Tommy."

"I am trying to be fair," protested Traynor, "but what are the facts? He comes here, a total stranger, from Europe, on a visit; he shows his interest in the jewels in the library safe by nosing in on Mr. Radcliffe and me—"

"So did the butler."

"Then in the middle of the night I find him roaming about—"

"So were you—and others."

"He tries to make out that the ghost thing was real—"

"Mr. Radcliffe believed in it. Lots of educated people are sincere in such beliefs."

"But he doesn't look right or act right, Kent."

"His glasses make him look queer, distorting his expression. He has a bad case of long-sightedness, a common enough affliction, Tommy, and he abominates those glasses himself. As for his acting ill at ease, would you feel very comfortable if you were in his shoes?"

"What do you mean?"

"He comes to America as travelling escort for an aunt who has hitherto been a stranger to him. He has been highly educated with plenty of spending money until his father died and left him stranded—accustomed to go off on hunting expeditions with prospective dukes and baronets. He lives off his aunt's bounty; she drags him around to marry him off to some wealthy American girl. He is sensitive of being disliked and is anxious to get away from Hillcrest where he feels he is not welcome. Then this tragedy happens and he finds himself subject to the inquisitiveness of the police, discovering that Fargey is suspicious of his aunt. The possibilities of newspaper publicity loom large; he even begins to wonder whether his aunt's relations with Radcliffe in the past have anything to do with the situation. The thought is very disturbing and he is greatly worried. He picks out your humble servant as the only one with whom he can discuss the situation—"

"And proceeds to fill said humble servant full of misinformation," grumbled Traynor.

"You are prejudiced, Tommy."

"All right. What about the new butler, then?"

"Fargey does not like him—"

"Neither do I. He's too sneaky to suit me."

"Yet what has he done? Nothing—except go about his duties with the *savoir faire* of the well-trained English servant. He has been taught to efface himself, to move silently and surely about his work."

"It's at least a positive fact that you are in a negative mood to-night. Then who is there left that could be this man Alceste under cover?"

"You won't allow me to suggest that in spite of his established position as an American gem expert, Mr. Armaund Lamont—"

"Oh for heaven's sake, be sensible!" cried Traynor in disgust.

"If it were a detective novel I were writing—what would be the matter with having Mrs. Saint-Anton the clever Alceste masquerading as a woman, then?"

"Impossible!" breathed Traynor. He stared at his smiling friend.

"Yet there are very clever female impersonators who could perform the feat and surely such an exceptionally clever artist as this gentleman cracksman—"

"Aw, get out of here, Kent! I'm going to bed," laughed Tommy. "You're the limit! By process of elimination we'll be arriving at the conclusion that there has been no robbery and no murder—"

"That is why it is foolish to lose sleep over it," chuckled Kent. "Do you think Alceste would be fool

enough to camp on top of a bombshell? One of the best things he does is to put distance between him and the scene of his operations. Also he is too much of an artist to spoil his pretty thefts with anything so unaesthetic as murder. His past record is clean in that respect at least. Well, I'm going now. Good-night, Tommy.”

Addison Kent did not retire to his room immediately. A glance at his watch assured him that it was not so very late and he had a fancy to get outdoors away from the lights of the great house and in some quiet corner of the grounds classify the impressions which had been crowded into the last twelve hours. From the pergola he noted that Armaund Lamont's limousine was drawn up at the porte cochère and the chauffeur was lolling in his seat, smoking a cigarette and reading a newspaper while he waited for his two passengers to put in an appearance. A patrolman stepped from behind the shrubbery and stopped Kent as he wandered off across the lawns in the direction of the summer-house, apologizing and withdrawing as he recognized him in the flash of his electric torch.

The moon was almost smothered in the murk which was spreading across the sky and Kent had to proceed cautiously until his eyes grew more accustomed to the half gloom that prevailed. He had selected the vine-clad arbor as the most isolated spot where he could give his thoughts rein without fear of intrusion; but as he approached he paused in surprise at finding it already occupied.

The voices which reached him in a confused murmur

were those of a man and a woman and Kent half turned to retreat, having no inclination to spy upon a lovers' tryst; but at sound of a subdued sob he halted uncertainly and after a moment of listening, he stole closer under shelter of a hedge. This was no mere maid's foolishness; the carefully lowered voices were tense with an excitement which was with difficulty suppressed and the colloquy was being held in French. It was a language which was very familiar to Kent and curiosity took him still nearer to the arbor to listen with both ears as he recognized the accents of the man's voice. It was Mr. Armaund Lamont beyond a doubt!

Who was the woman? Why was it necessary for them to meet in this clandestine manner? Lamont must have come straight to this prearranged meeting from Traynor's room. Kent felt justified in eavesdropping when circumstances were so palpably not above suspicion. The interview had been a hurried one evidently and it was being hurriedly concluded as if the risk of discovery was a vital matter to both.

"I must go. I cannot tell you more—not here, Armaund. It is too dangerous," whispered the woman anxiously. "The black shadow of the château is creeping far beyond the old bridge. Ah, *mon dieu!* Am I never to escape it? It is more than I can bear, more than I can bear!"

"Nothing can harm you, my Yvonne, now that you have me to shield you," came the soothing voice of the man. "You must be brave a little longer, my dear girl. Ah, it is such a joy to have found you again, Yvonne! You will let me help you—"

"Ssh! What was that? Did you hear nothing? Oh, Armaund, I am so afraid, afraid!"

"It is but the leaves in the breeze, Yvonne. I will let no harm befall you. I am strong; I am rich; I have influence. To-morrow, then, you will come to me and tell me all your troubles? And see, they will be gone like little clouds before the rising sun. It is indeed so, dearest one."

"Ah, you are so good, dear friend!"

"That is nothing. Guard well your tongue and all will come out aright. We will be happy at last—happy together at last, my Yvonne."

They were coming out now. Kent pressed deeper into the leafage. The two dark forms separated hastily and melted into the shadows in opposite directions. Kent hurried after the woman and soon caught sight of her; she was making a detour which would bring her to the house by way of the garden. If he cut straight across the lawns to the pergola he could intercept her at the basement entry for which she was heading. He must discover her identity.

So intent was Addison Kent upon this that he failed to see a third figure which slunk away in the bushes on the farther side of the arbor—slunk with the greatest of caution, like a shadow of the night, along the hedgerows to the rear of the estate. The man vaulted the stone wall and disappeared at top speed along the highway to the woodland path which struck through the park over the ridge to the shore drive.

CHAPTER XIV

SURPRISES

MEANWHILE Kent lost no time in taking up a position in the back hallway, behind a door. Through the crack he had a good view of the short flight of steps up which anyone must pass who used the basement entry. The hall light was switched on and unless he had made a bad guess—

A light footfall apprized him that he had not. The basement door was open and he heard the scrape of boots on the cement floor. She threw back the cape of a light cloak as she came up the steps and paused for an instant to pat her hair, heaving a sigh of relief as her eye swept the empty hallway.

When he got a clear look at her features Kent had difficulty in preventing his surprise from revealing his presence. It was Mrs. Stanton, the seamstress.

The novelist certainly had not expected this and he debated the advisability of stepping from his concealment and questioning this gentle woman who enjoyed the confidence of Miss Radcliffe, had been with the family for a long time and so evidently held her mistress in affectionate regard. As he hesitated the faint sound of stealthy footsteps just beyond the basement doorway decided him; he drew back out of sight and allowed the

seamstress to continue down the hall. The sound of the inner door closing behind her came to him distinctly.

It was followed at once by a quick light patter of feet. Addison Kent's eyes glinted with interest as he peered through the crack of the door. He recognized the young woman as the housemaid who had been assigned to attend Mrs. Saint-Anton during her stay at Hillcrest. Traynor had pointed her out that afternoon as she passed in the hall; her name was Lucille Beliveau.

She came up the steps on tip-toe, craning her neck for a cautious survey of the hallway and casting nervous glances over her shoulder. She fairly jumped when Kent stepped out from behind the door, her eyes widening in surprise and a little ejaculation of dismay escaping her. His smile, however, reassured her somewhat as did also his bantering greeting.

"Where do you come from, my pretty maid?" he paraphrased.

"I come from the milking, sir, she said," retorted the girl pertly. Her black eyes flashed at him in coquetry; for he was good to look upon and the girl evidently was a born flirt.

"The cows, no doubt, were in the pasture 'far beyond the old bridge.' Were they? But 'nothing can harm you, my Yvonne, now that you have me to shield you.'"

She shrank away from him, staring at him in utter amazement. If she was not completely dumbfounded by these strange words she was a wonderful actress.

"My name is Lucille, sir,—Lucille Beliveau," she faltered in a voice and manner from which all pertness had vanished.

"Why, yes, to be sure," smiled Addison Kent. "How stupid of me! You are in attendance upon Mrs. Saint-Anton, are you not? She sent you out on a message, perhaps?"

"No, sir. She is ill in her room. She said she'd ring if she wanted anything. She wanted to be left alone."

"Look here, Lucille, you have nothing to lose by being frank with me. I am not the kind that tells everything I know. It is important that you tell me exactly where you have been. And why do you come in as if you were afraid of being seen?"

"Miss Radcliffe sent Catharine to look for me. I did not want her to know I had been outside the house."

"Catharine?"

"Mrs. Stanton."

"Oh, so her name is Catharine, eh? You knew the police have requested everyone to remain indoors to-night, I suppose?"

"Yes. But I have a gentleman friend on the Force; he is on duty here to-night."

"I see. And you went out at his request?"

"No." She studied him a moment. "I will tell you, if you promise not to get either of us into trouble, sir. He had not had his supper and—I took him out some sandwiches and a piece of pie."

Kent laughed and she smiled up at him a little doubtfully.

"All right. We'll let it go at that, Lucille. It is a terrible thing for a policeman to be hungry and I am sure it was very thoughtful of you. I believe I would

welcome you with open arms myself under those circumstances." She flashed him the smile of a piquant little minx. "What time did you leave Mrs. Saint-Anton last night?" he asked unexpectedly.

"About eleven o'clock, I think it was, when she dismissed me for the night, sir."

"And you did not see her until this morning, eh? Was she taken ill in the night?"

"Oh, no. She is all right—except for a bad headache."

"But she was up part of the night, wasn't she?"

"She said she had not slept very well, sir. That is all I know about it."

It was evident that the girl was growing restive under this volley of questions, and Kent allowed her to go without further inquisitiveness. He had heard Lamont's big car depart some moments before, so there was nothing to be gained in that direction. Accordingly he retired to his own rooms, threw off his coat and made himself comfortable for his deferred mental review of the whole situation.

There were several angles to the mystery surrounding Henry Radcliffe's death which puzzled Addison Kent not a little. Not the least of these was the latest development. Lucille Beliveau was an exceptionally bright girl. Was it she who had met Lamont in the arbor and talked so strangely? An *affaire d'amour* between a pretty maid and a confirmed old bachelor was by no means beyond the possibilities. Or was she acting in some way as a go-between for Mrs. Saint-Anton? Perhaps Mrs. Saint-Anton herself had been in the arbor while Lucille remained on guard—

For over an hour he sat there, lost in deep thought and a blue haze of tobacco smoke. A sharp tap on the door aroused him at last and in answer to his invitation, Detective-Sergeant Hayes entered.

"Oh, it's you, Sergeant. Come and sit down. Have a cigar."

"Thanks, Mr. Kent. You said to report to you at any hour, sir, and I bring some bad news."

"That so?"

"I've just been talking to Mac on the 'phone, Mr. Kent, and he's rattled complete. Has reason to be, too. McVey went into town in Mr. Lamont's car on purpose to see that he got home safe, as you know. Well, they reached Lamont's house O.K. and went inside—into the library. It was not till then that they found they'd been robbed."

"What?"

"That collar of pearls has been stolen slick as a whistle, Mr. Kent."

"Are you sure? What does McVey say?"

"He says they didn't touch the parcel till they got into the library. Mr. Lamont carried it on his knees all the way in. The jewel-case was in a cardboard box and the whole thing was wrapped in brown paper and tied with a string. McVey swears nobody touched it after they left. Yet when Lamont comes to open the velvet case to take a look before sticking them in his safe, the pearls were gone. The case was empty. Lamont is wild about it, Mac's feelin' kind o' sick himself."

"What have you done? Did you 'phone Fargey?"

"Yes. He was swearin' mad. But he's on his way to Lamont's by now an' will look after that end of it. Ought I to report this to Miss Radcliffe immediately, sir? She's asleep, I'm told."

"It will only upset her unnecessarily. The morning will do, Sergeant. Were you on hand when they left here—Lamont and McVey?"

"Yes, sir."

"When was the parcel handed to Mr. Lamont—just before he left?"

"No, sir. Miss Radcliffe got it from her room personally and gave it to him after dinner some time. He turns it over to McVey an' Mac spent the whole evenin' nursin' it like it was his lunch-box. He's flabbergasted, Mac is. And I'll be blessed if I know what to make of it myself."

"Well, I wouldn't try to make too much of it, Sergeant. I think it would be best not to talk of it at all or some of the newspaper men may get hold of it and we don't want that. It may turn out that Miss Radcliffe forgot to put the pearls into the case when she did up the parcel."

He bade the other good-night and began to get ready for bed. He knew that this was no instance of neglect upon the part of his hostess, and he laughed a little as he reached for the dangling chain of the reading-lamp.

"The clever beggar!"

Addison Kent's prediction that the coroner's inquest would be productive of little, if any, new evidence of

importance was fulfilled the following morning. It was a tiresome session which disappointed the curious spectators who had fed upon the newspaper reports of the murder and robbery at Hillcrest and fully expected something unusual to happen. One after another the servants took the witness stand and told in tedious detail their routine on the Saturday night; none of them had anything to report which could throw the least light on the crime; all of them had been in their beds at a respectable hour and had slept through the night without alarm. Mrs. Stanton was the only member of the household who "slept out" and when she testified to having left for home at her customary hour, Coroner Charles ordered her to stand down, unable to conceal his irritation; he did not relish wasting questions upon useless witnesses.

Interest centred upon Miss Rose Radcliffe, because of her relationship to the murdered man and because of her great beauty rather than upon her evidence. It was apparent that she was under a heavy strain; but she bravely answered the questions put to her and earned the sympathy of the court.

Mrs. Saint-Anton also gave her evidence in a straightforward manner, adhering consistently to the story she had told already to the police. She had not been out of her room after retiring for the night, she said. The whole affair had distressed her so greatly that she had been confined to her room most of the time since with one of her terrible headaches. She looked ill and had recourse to her smelling-salts in the witness-box. As she retired with a rustling of silk and an air of profound relief

Lieutenant Fargey caught Addison Kent watching him and smiled contentedly.

There was something puzzling about Fargey's whole manner this morning; at least, Kent fancied so. The lieutenant of detectives might have been excused for being in no very amiable mood; for the police investigation appeared to be making no progress at all and the theft of the pearls the night before was nothing short of a taunt to the detectives. It certainly would not improve the feeling at headquarters. Yet Lieutenant Fargey was full of smiles, or, at least, the scowls were absent, even when the jury filed in with the usual verdict of murder in the first degree by "person or persons unknown." It was as if he viewed the paucity of evidence, the lack of eye-witnesses, the opaqueness of the mystery with the unconcern of a man who already held the key in his hand.

Kent did not return to Hillerest with the others after the court proceedings were concluded. He went to his own apartment in Minaki Annex to look over his mail. While he was in the middle of it the telephone rang at his elbow and he took down the receiver. There was a business-like briskness in the salutation which came over the wire.

"Fargey talking, Kent. Where's Traynor?"

"Gone back to Westchester with Miss Radcliffe and the rest."

"Well, I'm going out there myself now and I thought perhaps you might like to come along in my car."

"Thanks, Lieutenant; but I'm just going over my mail—"

"Bring it along with you. I think you'll want to come."

"Why? What's doing?"

Fargey's throaty laugh was expressive of triumph.

"Tell you that when I see you. Pick you up in about twenty-five minutes."

"All right—if it's important."

"Important enough, I guess. We've found the shirt-cuff!"

CHAPTER XV

THE SECRET OF THE STEAMER TRUNK

“WELL, gentlemen, things have come to a showdown.” Fargey took in the circle of faces with evident satisfaction. He had assembled them in the trunk room on the third floor at Hillcrest—Kent, Traynor, Roger Levering, Detective-Sergeant Hayes and Smith, a chirographic expert from the bureau whom he had brought along in the police auto. As Fargey’s gaze came to rest upon Levering his eyes narrowed and his mouth set grimly.

“What I have to say concerns you specially, sir. I am giving you the chance to say what you think before action is taken. I am going to lay my cards down, face up, and if any of you gentlemen think I am not playing fair I’d like you to say so frank an’ open. Personally I see only one thing left for me to do and as the representative of the Law, that’s what I’m here to do. Murder ain’t what you might call a pretty thing an’ when the Law has to deal with it there ain’t any reason for being polite an’ all that. I ain’t here to preach a sermon but to do the best I can to bring the party who killed Henry Radcliffe to justice. Who that party happens to be, man or woman, rich or poor, don’t matter; it’s all the same to the Law.”

Fargey paused, as if to note the effect of this preamble, and was gratified to observe the gravity on every face. Roger Levering seemed to sense the crisis which he faced and it was apparent that he held himself in repression with difficulty. He offered no comment.

"You are all familiar with what happened here between Saturday at midnight and Sunday morning. Henry Radcliffe was found shot to death in his room and the safe in the library was robbed. I ain't prepared to say whether the robbery had anything to do with the murder. The first question to answer is: Who killed Henry Radcliffe? In the course of our investigations we have discovered certain evidence which points conclusively to the guilty party and I have to inform you that we are about to arrest the woman who has been a guest in this house for the past week. I refer to Mrs. Saint-Anton."

"No, no! Surely—!" cried Levering. He stepped across to Fargey and clutched his arm. "Man, man—there must be some terrible mistake! You do not mean what you say?"

Fargey eyed him coldly as he loosened his fingers.

"Calm yourself, sir. I am not in the habit of making statements without good reason," he said sharply. "Allow me to proceed. We found clutched in Radcliffe's hand this gold pencil; as you see, it was worn on a chain. The rest of the chain was picked up beneath the fire-escape a little to one side of the window of the sitting-room where the body was found." He passed it to Addison Kent, together with the pencil, and asked him to compare the broken links. "Mrs. Saint-Anton admits that

the pencil belongs to her, but says it disappeared from her dresser on Saturday and she did not see it again until Sunday morning; she also swore on her oath, at the inquest this morning, that she had not been outside of her room after retiring on Saturday evening about eleven o'clock.

"We might accept these statements as true but for other and more damning evidence of her guilt. That she was in Henry Radcliffe's room is proved by the fact that her finger-prints were left upon certain ornaments on the mantel which had got knocked over in the struggle which took place and which she put back in order; we had no difficulty in obtaining her prints and our Bertillon department has identified them beyond question."

"They might have been left on the ornaments at some other time," objected Kent.

"Very true, Mr. Kent. We'll let that stand for what it's worth and pass on, if you don't mind."

"But, hold on, Bob!" protested Traynor. "You say there was a struggle. Between Mr. Radcliffe and Mrs. Saint-Anton? But how could she have killed him? The shot was fired—"

"From the fire-escape!" cried Levering, eagerly.

"And by a man!" supplemented Traynor. "It was a man's face that looked in at my window. I'll swear to that." Levering looked at him gratefully.

"Patience, patience!" cautioned Fargey. A faint smile flickered at the corners of his mouth, which hardened again almost immediately into its stern lines. "I'm coming to all that presently. Here is the bullet which

the coroner extracted. Here is the ejected shell which Mr. Kent found on the driveway. Note that it fits, please, and that it belongs to an automatic of foreign manufacture—or at least, we will prove that soon. Here is the gun that was found near the body; it has not been discharged. Miss Radcliffe identifies it as one her father kept in his room. It doesn't matter.

"Very good. We come now to one clue which is unusual—the fact that one of the starched cuffs had been torn from Radcliffe's shirt. The gold pencil in his hand suggested to me at once that he might have written something on that cuff which was incriminating and for that reason was removed by the murderer. I started hunting for it without much hope of finding either it or the weapon which was used."

He paused and looked at Roger Levering with a flash of triumph. Fargey seemed to be taking a certain cruel pleasure in creating anxiety.

"Go on!" urged Traynor nervously.

"Please!" murmured Levering.

"Now, here's what happened as I make it out," resumed Fargey, turning to Kent. "I don't pretend to say what was between this woman and Henry Radcliffe; but they weren't on good terms. She goes into Radcliffe's room for an interview which ends in an argument. Radcliffe gets mad clean through and grabs the little gun out of the drawer or wherever he kept it—to scare her, perhaps. She takes it serious and grabs him by the wrists and there's a tussle for possession o' the gun. His hand swoops down and the diamond ring on his

finger scratches the looking-glass and knocks over some bric-a-brac on the mantel. She knocks the gun out of his fingers and jumps across the room for the window—”

“Why not the door?” interrupted Kent, eyes twinkling.

“Because it was likely locked and there wasn’t time—”

“But it was not found locked in the morning by the valet.”

“Then because she didn’t want to be seen in the hall,” said Fargey testily. “Is I was saying, she makes for the window to get away by the fire-escape and as she climbs out she sees Radcliffe reaching for the little revolver on the floor. She draws the automatic, wraps the heavy window drape around it to deaden the report—and lets him have it.”

“You are making out a clear case of self-defence, then?” and Kent smiled a little at the blank expression of Lieutenant Fargey’s face. Plainly the question disconcerted him for a moment.

“No, I’m not,” he asserted emphatically. “That is, I—Say, I’m tellin’ you the woman quarrelled with Radcliffe, ain’t I? An’ that he was expectin’ trouble with her and kept the gun in his room, loaded for protection—from what? From this woman. He was afraid of her, see. Was she wearin’ an automatic for a bangle or a brooch? I’m askin’ you!” said Fargey with a sarcasm which converted his face into ugly lines of resentment; he found it difficult enough to convey things in their right order without all these interruptions.

“Where was I?—Oh, yes. Well, as soon as she shoots him she gets afraid the sound of the shot might have

wakened somebody, especially Traynor in the room alongside; so she sneaks along an' takes a peek through his window. He says it's a man's face he saw. What I say is that nobody just wakened out of a heavy sleep can be sure of what they think they see for a minute or two. Traynor was sitting up in bed, wakened by the shot but not recognizing the sound. She just had time to climb over the rail of the fire-escape and hang out of sight from the bars of the grating beneath when out comes Traynor. The moon has just gone under a cloud and he fails to see anyone in the dim light—"

"Could your aunt have done a stunt like that, Levering?" asked Traynor doubtfully. "Isn't she too elderly?"

"I—I don't know—but what she could," stammered Roger Levering reluctantly. "It seems to explain why you didn't see anybody when you looked. My aunt is quite athletic. She can beat me at tennis," he admitted. "She could do it all right, but it seems rather impossible, Lieutenant. The whole thing—"

"Anyways, that's what she did," reaffirmed Fargey. "She waited till Traynor went inside his room again, then dropped quietly to the ground—"

"Not in high-heeled shoes, surely?"

"Who said she had on high heels, Kent?" demanded Fargey truculently. "Besides, it was only a four-foot drop at that. But she was wearin' her tennis shoes."

"How do you know that?"

"I found the marks of 'em on the driveway, right underneath—the criss-cross marks of the heels, that is. An' if that ain't enough, I got a look at those tennis

shoes in her room, an' found gravel imbedded in the rubber—sunk right in."

He looked at each of them in turn, challenging further objections. Somewhat mollified by the gravity on every face, he proceeded less aggressively:

"It was when she dropped those few feet to the ground that the rest of the chain around her neck fell off, unnoticed. Radcliffe had made a snatch at her and busted it. She didn't miss it till she got back into the house—through the servant's entrance in the basement; she had got a passkey that would open that door. Finding nobody anywhere in sight in the upper hall, she goes back into Radcliffe's room—"

"Again? That would take a lot of nerve, Bob."

"Nerve is this lady's middle name, Tommy," retorted Fargey.

"Were the lights still on in the room? You forgot to say, Lieutenant," Kent suggested mildly.

"No, they were out—or Traynor would have noticed them when he went out onto the fire-escape. That was the first thing she did after knocking the gun out of Radcliffe's hand—jumped for the light switch—"

"Which would bring her right alongside the door into the hall," nodded Kent. "Strange she did not just slip out instead of going clean across the room to the window where she would offer a good target against the moonlit sky for Radcliffe's gun. She was afraid he was going to shoot her, you said, didn't you?"

"Are—Say, are you deliberately tryin' to mix me up, Kent?" Fargey glared at him angrily.

"Not at all, Lieutenant. You have been so clear and logical that it is easy to follow you. I am merely wondering how she saw Radcliffe reaching for the gun on the floor when the lights were out and she was blocking the light from the window—"

"She *heard* him, rather than saw him.

"Please go on, Lieutenant," came Levering's anxious voice. "The lights are an unimportant detail, are they not? The little reading-lamp in the bedroom would still be lit and would throw enough light—"

"Exactly," snapped Fargey. "She came in to look for the gold pencil, but forgot all about it when she saw the writing on the cuff. She tore it off, greatly excited, stuffed it inside her dress, went in and put out the light beside the bed—and went back to her own room."

"What about the scratches on the fire-escape, Lieutenant?"

"She scratched out those finger-prints some time after daylight—with a pen-knife. It was done with a small knife, Kent—not with the nails in a boot-sole, as you thought."

"You will have great difficulty in finding a jury who would convict upon such evidence," said Roger Levering calmly. He mopped his forehead with his handkerchief.

"Would, eh?" grunted Fargey. "Guess you're right. I admit it. But—Say, who doe sthat steamer trunk belong to?" He pointed across the room to where it stood against the wall near the door, its variegated labels eloquent of travel abroad.

"It belongs to my aunt," replied Levering promptly.

"Does, eh? Show them what you found this morning, Sergeant."

Detective-Sergeant Hayes stepped over to the trunk, undid the buckles, threw open the lid and stepped back. They crowded close, craning their necks with intense interest. The trunk was full of various odds and ends of clothing and travel accessories which had been rummaged about by the probing hands of the police.

"I tried to leave it the way I found it, as near as I could remember," volunteered Hayes. "If you lift that steamer rug, Mr. Kent—"

Kent did so. The missing shirt-cuff was staring up at them! He picked it up gingerly by the edges and held it where all could read the purplish writing which was scrawled across it in an erratic line. As if with one accord all eyes focused upon Roger Levering who turned from them in evident misery, walked across to the window and buried his head on his arm. Here was proof indeed!

The message on the cuff read: "Woman known as Mrs. St. Anton shot me." And it was signed, "Henry C. Radcliffe."

Tommy Traynor's startled gaze turned to Addison Kent. The novelist's eyes had narrowed; his jaw muscles were knotted, his hands clenched, but he stood motionless without other sign of what was passing through his mind at that moment.

"Here, Smith!" Fargey's voice sounded metallic as it struck across the ominous silence. "Here's a cancelled

check of Radcliffe's. Compare those signatures. You'll have to allow for the conditions he was writin' under, o' course."

The handwriting expert examined the cuff under a microscope for a few minutes, scrutinizing both it and the signature on the check very closely.

"I would not take oath that they are the same," he said, slowly shaking his head, and Kent glanced at him keenly. "But—allowing for the texture of the linen—and the fact that the man was dying—and that the room was almost in darkness—neither would I swear that both signatures could not have been written by the same hand. Fact is, they are so similar I am inclined to believe that the signature on the cuff is genuine."

"Down in this corner of the trunk," said Detective-Sergeant Hayes, sinking to one knee and delving as he spoke, "I found this also."

He held up a small, neat, pearl-handled automatic hammerless pistol. Kent reached for it and examined it with interest. It was an exceptionally compact and well-made little weapon that lay flat on his palm. It was small enough to be carried in a lady's muff—a wicked looking little gun that undoubtedly could do deadly work at short range. He recognized it at once as a pocket model .25 caliber Browning, of Belgian manufacture—Fabrique Nationale D'Armes de Guerre at Liege. The magazine held six shots; it contained only five now.

Fargy drew their attention to the fact that the shell picked up on the driveway fitted the gun perfectly

and that one shot had been fired from the magazine.

"Can you identify this weapon, Mr. Levering?" he asked.

Roger Levering turned towards them and nodded dully.

"It's hers," he admitted in a low voice.

Traynor moved over to his side and silently pressed his arm in encouragement.

"Thanks, old chap," murmured Levering huskily. He seemed to get a better grip on himself and cleared his throat. "Gentlemen, this thing is—a bit of a shock, you know. But there is no use in denying that Lieutenant Fargey appears to have ample justification for the worst suspicions against my—Mrs. Saint-Anton. With your permission, sir, I would like to summon her—"

"Just what I was going to do," interrupted Fargey. "Sergeant, will you bring the lady here immediately—and Miss Radcliffe as well. It ain't going to be pleasant, Tommy; but I am only doing my duty."

Detective-Sergeant Hayes walked briskly to the door, threw it open—and almost collided with the butler!

"Miss Radcliffe's compliments, Mr. Traynor—"

"Hey, you, Thompson!" called Fargey brusquely. "We ain't handing out bouquets o' sweet lavender to-day. You beat it downstairs and tell Miss Radcliffe— Go along with him, Sergeant." He waved them out peremptorily and closed the door. He replaced the shirt-cuff and the automatic in the steamer trunk and dropped the lid, then drew Addison Kent to one side.

"Well, what about theories now, Kent?" and he grinned

provokingly. "I said I had a hunch about this thing from the first, didn't I?"

Kent shrugged his shoulders and held out his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"There is, of course, a point where theory may merge with fact."

Fargey fancied with satisfaction that the author's smile was a trifle sheepish.

"Think I've got the goods on her, eh?"

"The facts must speak for themselves, Lieutenant. In the face of this situation any opinion I might express would be entirely presumptuous. You overwhelm me with evidence."

Fargey chuckled. There was a gleam in his eye as he lowered his voice to a pitch that could not be overheard.

"This is only a starter. We got this guy, Alceste, to deal with yet an' I want to warn you to lay low on that. The robbery an' the murder are two separate things. I'm workin' quiet an' I'll let you in on it when the fruit's ripe. Get me. If we pull it off right, it'll be the biggest thing you an' me—"

He broke off abruptly and turned away to talk to Levering. Traynor started towards Kent but stepped quickly across to the door as footsteps sounded on the stairs. The tension which everyone felt tightened at sight of the two ladies on the threshold.

As they came slowly into the room and noted the group that stood awaiting them with sober faces the expression of both was one of bewilderment. Lieutenant Fargey, however, wasted no time in explaining to the mistress of

the house his reason for summoning them. The cloud of trouble which had hung over her for the past two days had left its mark upon the girl; she looked pale and worn and shrank instinctively closer to Tommy Traynor who stood beside her. He pressed her hand reassuringly.

"Our work here is just about over, Miss Radcliffe," Fargey was saying. "We have made some important discoveries this morning and I have a few questions to ask." He turned abruptly to Mrs. Saint-Anton and pointed to the steamer trunk. "That baggage belongs to you, I believe, madam?"

"Ye-es!"

He strode over and threw back the lid.

"And this also?" He held out the automatic for identification.

"Why—yes, that is mine, I think. I had one like it in that trunk. But what do you mean, sir, going into my things—?"

"That will do, madam!" commanded Fargey sharply. "It's me's askin' the questions. Why did you commit perjury in the witness box this morning? Will you answer that?"

"Perjury!" gasped Mrs. Saint-Anton, falling back a step.

"That's what I said." Fargey pointed his finger straight in her face. "You swore on your oath that you were not outside of your room on Saturday night after eleven o'clock. We have evidence to prove that you were in Henry Radcliffe's room after midnight!"

Her face went white. Her eyes widened in sudden

fear as they swept the circle. Fascinated, she watched Lieutenant Fargey lifting from the trunk an oblong of white. She shrank back as he advanced upon her, holding it for her to see.

"Read it! Read it!" commanded Fargey sternly. He passed it to Traynor and laid his hand on the woman's shoulder. "Madam, you are under arrest—for the murder of Henry Radcliffe!"

"It's a lie!" she said weakly. "I did not kill him! I swear it!"

"The oath of a perjurer!"

"I did not, I tell you! Oh, *mon dieu*, you must believe me! You must! I was in the room—but as God is my judge—"

"It is my duty to warn you, madam, that whatever you say may be used against you."

"I tell you, it's a lie! I have never seen that thing before. How did it get in my trunk? I did not kill him!"

She turned frantically towards Rose Radcliffe who had bowed her head with a shudder at the accusation. She looked around in mute appeal, seemingly dazed by the crisis that had come upon her so suddenly. Her face was ghastly with its red spots of rouge pathetically apparent. Gone was all that poise, that superior air which had characterized her bearing, and she looked suddenly old.

Her frightened eyes at last encountered those of Roger Levering.

"Tell them, Roger—you at least do not believe—this terrible, impossible thing."

But even as she spoke she saw that he did believe it. His face was pale and set in grim lines that repelled her. He said nothing—merely turned his back upon her.

And at that a look of positive terror grew in the woman's eyes. Kent saw it and stepped closer to her. It was the look of a cornered animal. Weakly she sank down upon a trunk and covered her face as she emitted a tragic little moan.

Detective-Sergeant Hayes at a nod from his superior laid a hand upon her shoulder. Like one in a dream she permitted herself to be guided from the room.

CHAPTER XVI

A PACKET OF CARDBOARD MATCHES

THE arrest of Mrs. Saint-Anton for the murder of Henry C. Radcliffe in his Westchester mansion was a front-page feature for the newspapers. The more sensational of them devoted considerable space to it and illustrated their "stories" by photos of all the actors in the drama, the shirt-cuff, the weapon that did the deed, the steamer trunk—marked X to show where the articles were found—, the house and grounds and so on. In the case of the *Mercury*, Tommy Traynor's former paper, an intelligent editor had dug into the files and reviewed the old story of the charity bazaar fire in which one Traynor, star reporter for the *Mercury*, had rescued the beautiful heiress, Miss Rose Radcliffe, etc., etc. This—illustrated by photos of Tommy and Rose, set in two artistic hearts, done in crayon and interlinked by a romantic newspaper artist—was so delicately handled that even Tommy with his appreciation of news values was forced to forgive it.

Less excusable by far were some of the veiled hints in regard to the possible relations between the late Henry C. Radcliffe and "the mystery woman," as she was called. A few of the reporters had found ready to hand in the "morgues" of their respective papers a fine sheaf of

interesting clippings in regard to the wealthy gem expert's past activities; they had not hesitated to use imagination in drawing inferences from his goings and comings—all carefully worded, of course, with due regard to the libel law. Mr. Radcliffe had made several trips to France and the lady had a French name; ergo this and ergo that. Who was she? Why had she gone into his room after midnight? Was it a case of blackmail, jealous revenge or what? And so on to the yellow limit of daring!

And through it all stalked the heroic figure of Lieutenant Robert Fargey. The astuteness of the police, Lieutenant Fargey in charge, was played up from every angle. From the first the police suspected the very things that had happened and they had worked quietly and well, etc., etc. The speed with which they had followed the clues to an arrest was exceptional and reflected great credit, etc., etc.

Nor was Mr. Addison Kent overlooked. The presence of the famous novelist in the house as a friend of the family had been duly noted. Himself a writer of great detective stories which enjoyed phenomenal sale, he was qualified to appreciate the good work of the police. He had been prepared to assist them in their investigations but had found that Lieutenant Fargey had the case so well in hand that his own great powers of deduction were not required. Seen at his apartment in Minaki Court, he paid a graceful compliment to Lieutenant Fargey and admitted that the evidence appeared to leave nothing for him to say.

Kent smiled as he read and clipped the newspaper accounts. Fargey's vanity for once ought to be gratified by the flattering publicity he was receiving. Poor Bob! it was his very bread and meat. In handing out the details to the reporters he had made no mention of the "ghost", Kent noted; Fargey had told the author that he was sure that Mrs. Saint-Anton was responsible for the strange figure on the stair—if Traynor and Levering really had seen the thing. But that he was perplexed in regard to it was apparent in the fact that he was carefully concealing mention of it at all and had cautioned both Traynor and Levering to do likewise.

The business career of Henry Radcliffe, his rapid rise, his archaeological discoveries, the prominent part he had taken in the modern "arts and crafts" movement in the United States—all this was duly recorded and space given to the wonderful collection of Cypriot art objects which he had helped to assemble for the Metropolitan Museum of Art. His private collection of antiques and gems was not forgotten while the great value of the diamond necklace and the collar of pearls that had been stolen from Hillcrest came in for attention.

But of the many items of interest which Kent carefully clipped out and classified for his files he smoked longest over those which touched upon the late Henry Radcliffe's activities abroad. One of these in particular seemed to catch and hold his eye; yet it was only a paragraph which read:

Fate seems to have a trick of singling out certain human beings and crossing their lives with lines of tragedy. It was while the late Mr. Radcliffe was on one of his excursions in

France that his marriage to a young French woman took place. But after a honeymoon spent with his friends, Professor William Winterby and wife, on their French estate, Mr. Radcliffe returned to America without his bride whom he was forced to leave behind in Switzerland, too ill to travel. Some time later he crossed the Atlantic and brought back his infant daughter, Mrs. Radcliffe still remaining in her native land. When at last his wife did make the journey to her new home she was killed in a railway wreck. Identification was made by a gold locket which he had given her on their wedding day. By a strange freak of the disaster she had been decapitated and the head was never found. Later his daughter nearly lost her life in a fire in New York. Now Henry Radcliffe himself lies slain by the bullet of an assassin.

Kent glanced at his watch and gave a low whistle at the fleetness of time. Hastily placing the clipping inside a leather wallet which he took from his pocket, he reached for his hat and gloves. His taxi was waiting and he had left himself little time to catch his train.

The newspapers he had been clipping were three days old. The funeral of Henry Radcliffe had served to keep public interest alive; but with the victim buried, the guilty person in custody—no question of that, of course!—and the trial a long way off yet, the Hillcrest case had slumped from columns to paragraphs in the current editions, much to Addison Kent's satisfaction.

It also was to his satisfaction that Miss Rose Radcliffe had acceded to the urgings of her friend, Miss Marjorie Struthers, to get away from Hillcrest with its depressing associations. She had gone to the Struthers summer home on Long Island that very morning for a visit of uncertain duration, leaving it to Tommy Traynor to assist the family solicitor in his adjustments. Roger Levering was gone—only the police knew where—and

the servants were no doubt settling down to a quiet vacation after all the excitement.

It was Thompson who opened the door for him in response to his ring and it was the butler whom Kent had come to see. They went at once into the library and Thompson closed the library doors and locked them. There was a look of calm satisfaction on his mild countenance as he faced the visitor across the library table and reaching carefully into his pocket, he drew forth a long manilla envelope.

"I am glad to report that I have met with some success, Mr. Kent. I believe these are what you asked me to find ,if possible."

As he spoke he emptied the contents of the envelope upon the table—a little heap of paper fragments. Kent bent over them with close scrutiny as he poked and spread the scraps with his forefinger, assembling and reassembling them without a word for five minutes.

"Where did you find them?"

"In the furnace room where the sweepings go. I had to sort over a lot of rubbish in the dustbin, Mr. Kent,—personally; I could trust nobody else to do it thoroughly enough."

"Quite right. And you have made a clean job of a dirty one. I congratulate you, Thompson. This is what I wanted," said Kent as he carefully scraped the fragments off the table edge into the envelope, sealed it and placed it in his pocket. "I hope you found the other assignment more to your liking."

"She is a bit of a flirt, Mr. Kent, and I had no great

trouble," smiled Thompson, unconsciously pulling down his waistcoat and straightening his tie.

"And is Lucille really keeping company with a policeman?"

"With Patrolman Carney, of the 8th precinct—yes. They are to be married in the fall, I believe, and she is wearing his ring."

"Officer Carney is to be congratulated," smiled Kent. "His gain, though, will be Miss Radcliffe's loss, no doubt. Miss Radcliffe got away this morning all right?"

"Yes. Follis looked after the trunks; but he had to send them by express through to Struthersholm because a telegram came from Miss Struthers this morning, asking Miss Radcliffe to take the Wading River branch line at Hicksville and get off at Woodland Cove. They plan to meet her there with the car and motor back."

Kent nodded and asked to see Mrs. Stanton. He was surprised to learn that she was ill and had sent one of the Stokes children up to the big house to ask Miss Radcliffe to excuse her for a few days.

"Where is this Stokes place at which she rooms? How do I get there?" and Thompson directed him to the path which cut across the wooded ridge of the park and down to the shore drive. "You will be anxious to get into action, Thompson. I want you to take the first train to Woodland Cove, just to make sure that everything is all right in that direction. You might call me on the 'phone from there. After that I leave you to your own devices."

"Very good, Mr. Kent."

The waters of Long Island Sound glittered in the afternoon sunlight in pleasing vista. The never-ending coast-wise traffic that plied in and out of New York Harbor provided a constant movement of New England freighters and coal barges and small craft of all descriptions, making in through Hell Gate to the East River. But as Addison Kent took his way along the wooded path through the park his eyes were mostly on the ground and his thoughts busy with other things than his surroundings.

He had no great difficulty in locating the park attendant's little bungalow. Mrs. Stokes herself was enjoying a quiet half hour in the hammock with a novel and Kent was amused to note that it was his own latest thriller in which her nose was buried. When he handed her his card the good woman stared at him in amazement. She was an omnivorous reader of popular fiction and she was not one of those careless ones who never look at the name of the author. To have the author of the very book she was reading walk in upon her like this startled her and her face flushed with excitement at an experience which provided such excellent material for subsequent conversation among her friends. He had no trouble at all in getting her to talk; for Mrs. Stokes was not only stout and good-natured but also sociably inclined to flexibility of the tongue with those she liked and it was apparent that Kent impressed her very favorably, as well he might.

Mrs. Stanton was not there. She had not returned home after the inquest; but had dropped a postcard

into the mail to say she was not very well and had accepted an invitation to spend a few days with a friend in the city. She had asked them to send one of the children to notify Miss Radcliffe. No, she had not said where she was going. Yes, it was somewhat unusual, because Mrs. Stanton seldom went out and was not one who made friends readily although she was a dear little lady.

If Kent had wondered why Mrs. Stanton chose to room with the Stokes family when she might have had comfortable quarters at Hillcrest, he found a reasonable answer as Mrs. Stokes proceeded to dilate upon the pleasant way in which her household got along with one another. The children were off at play somewhere; she had three and every one of them loved Mrs. Stanton. Mrs. Stokes and her husband had considered themselves very fortunate in having a former governess of such ladylike and superior qualities take an interest in their children. The way Mrs. Stanton had helped Jenny with her school work was wonderful; the child was at the head of her class.

"I don't think she's had a very happy life, poor lady," said Mrs. Stokes thoughtfully. "The way she hugs those kids sometimes—!" She sighed. "She enjoys it here with us—just like one of the family. We'd miss her awful if she went away."

"She seems to think quite a lot of her mistress—Miss Radcliffe. I suppose the murder has been a great shock to her?"

It had—a terrible shock. It was enough to shock anybody. When the detective had called at their cottage

the other night Mrs. Stokes herself had felt positively—

“When was that?” asked Kent quickly. “A detective, you say?”

“Oh, he’d only been sent over to tell us that the police were keepin’ everybody at the house to be ready for the inquest next mornin’—the Sunday night, it was—an’ for us not to wait up for Mrs. Stanton.”

“You are sure it was a detective who called?”

“That’s what he said an’ he flipped back his coat to show his shield. Mrs. Stanton asked him to fetch back her japanned box out of her bureau.”

“Japanned box?”

“Yes. It was a little black box with a key to it; she locked up her trinkets in it. It had gold decorations on it—long-legged birds an’ all that. I heard her say once it come from Japan.”

“Do you know what was in it?”

“Well, I ain’t sure. It was her private things an’ I aint one to nose in on what aint none o’ my business, Mr. Kent. Maybe she wanted a clean handkerchief or some-thin’ or a bit o’ jewelry to wear at the inquest.”

“Could you describe the man who called?” persisted Kent.

“Why—no, not very well,” replied Mrs. Stokes, a little surprised at his inquisitiveness. “It was after dark an’ he was on’y here a minute. He wasn’t tall nor what you’d call short—just medium, sort of. Least-ways, I think he was. I didn’t pay much attention—just give him the box. Why, Mr. Kent, did I do wrong?”

Kent reassured her as he stood up and prepared to

take his leave. No doubt Lieutenant Fargey had sent over one of his men and it was all right.

"Well, I must be going, Mrs. Stokes. I will see Mrs. Stanton later on, perhaps." He took out his cigarette-case, then felt for a match without success. "May I have these?" He stepped across the verandah to where a blackened pipe rested in a tin tray on the windowsill and picked up the packet of cardboard matches that lay alongside.

"Certainly. Take them with you," smiled Mrs. Stokes. "Bill's got lots more. He brought home a whole handful of those packets a while back; they always come in handy."

Kent thanked her and raised his hat. There was nothing in his manner to indicate the discovery he had made—that the cardboard matches advertised the same cigar as those he had picked up already in Henry Radcliffe's room and again on the secret stair at Hillcrest.

CHAPTER XVII

THE SHADOW OF THE CHÂTEAU

IT was about six o'clock when Addison Kent got back to his own apartment. Mrs. Madden had been in and the sight of the table, spread with a snowy cloth and set for one, reminded him that he was hungry. He grinned like a boy at the scribbled note which his house-keeper had propped against the water pitcher to the effect that he would find a salad and a fresh-baked cake in the ice-box and a casserole of chicken pie keeping hot in the electric oven. He whistled a cheerful tune as he got into clean linen after a freshening shower-bath and bustled about the kitchenette.

Once the inner man was satisfied and his pipe going well, Kent retired eagerly to his desk and started what promised to be an interesting night's work. He tore open the envelope Thompson had given him, got out a sheet of cardboard and a jar of office paste, and began the slow, arduous task of fitting together the tiny torn fragments of what once had been—or was supposed to have been—a lesson in chess-playing. It was the very chess notation which had been delivered on the Saturday afternoon preceding the murder and robbery at Hillcrest to Mr. Roger Levering in the presence of Tommy Traynor and the others.

What there was in a mere notation of chess moves to interest a man who had confessed to Levering that he knew nothing about the game might have been a reasonable matter for wonder. The pains which Addison Kent was taking to reconstruct the sheet of paper were out of all keeping with the desire of a novice to learn the game. And when at last he screwed the top on the paste-pot and held the cardboard at arm's length, his head critically on one side, his grunt of satisfaction was too emphatic to be casual. The luck held good; the only part of the sheet missing was a corner of blank paper.

He got down his chessboard now, arranged the white and black pieces and pawns in their proper positions and with the eye of a chess expert studied the notation sheet. A move or two on the board and he laughed outright. He jumped to his feet and went over to the bookcases. Here he glanced through a few volumes, finally brought one of them back to the desk and began to put strange marks upon a sheet of notepaper.

Presently he sat back and stared at what he had written with a strange and growing excitement. He went again to the bookcases and looked through some books. Then he consulted the card index to his file of newspaper clippings, glanced at his watch and hurried out. Half an hour later he was pouring over an assortment of volumes in the reference room at the public library and remained there until closing time. Shortly afterwards he was swinging aboard a Fifth Avenue bus at Forty-Second street and climbed to the roof where he sat with his hat on his knees, completely absorbed in thought.

It was a favorite ride of his, this, through the illuminated canyons of the downtown streets on top of a bus and then away to the quieter spaciousness of great brownstone residences. But to-night he was not out for an airing merely; he was heading for the home of Mr. Armaund Lamont on upper Fifth Avenue. It was the second time that day that he had occupied a seat on top of a Fifth Avenue bus; for after his morning call at Lamont's place of business he had taken the bus line and from his point of vantage had uncovered by sheer good luck the lie that had been told him by Lamont's private secretary. For how could Mr. Armaund Lamont be out of the city for a ten days' absence on special business when Kent had just seen the gentleman pass swiftly and luxuriously by in his limousine? Kent had an excellent pair of eyes and he knew that he had not been mistaken. He had decided then and there that he would call upon Lamont this evening without fail; the matter he wished to discuss could wait that long, but no longer.

Confident that he had only to hand in his card to be admitted, he stood at last in front of the imposing glass doors of the jeweler's residence and pushed on the electric bell with the ferule of his cane. For a lone bachelor Armaund Lamont lived in somewhat pretentious quarters which were almost exotic in the richness and artistic harmony of the furnishings. He had his own peculiar tastes in this direction and on occasional visits to the wealthy Frenchman's home with Traynor, Kent had found much to arouse aesthetic appreciation.

He smiled now as he saw the inner door open and the

familiar dark-skinned features of the Algerian servant peer out at him. This confidential man of Lamont's was a great silent slave of a fellow whose importation was justified a hundred times a day by the almost uncanny manner in which he seemed to anticipate his master's every wish. He had served Armaund Lamont for many years and lent a touch of the bizarre to the establishment both in dress and manner. The man recognized him with a grin which bared two rows of perfect white teeth and proceeded to inform him simply and plainly that his master was not at home.

"Hold on, 'Rastus'! Don't be in a hurry," said Kent pleasantly as he thrust his foot forward to prevent the door closing in his face. "Truth is one of the great virtues which you will do well to cultivate. In other words, why lie to me? I want to see Mr. Lamont very specially, as it happens; so take in this card at once."

The Algerian eyed him placidly and shook his head. Mr. Lamont was not at home.

"You mean he doesn't want to be disturbed by visitors. I'm sorry, but I must insist."

Again the man shook his head and tried to close the door. This time Kent shoved it open and stepped inside the vestibule.

"Now, look here, I'm not in any mood for fooling about this. Lamont is here and I know it." The flicker of uncertainty in the Algerian's eyes confirmed the guess. Kent turned his card over and wrote on the back of it. "Now take that in to him; he will be very angry with you if you don't. It's for his own good."

The man bowed his head silently and disappeared, leaving Kent to twiddle his thumbs with what patience he could command. The servant was back again in a moment, his dark face wreathed in smiles that he had done the right thing in submitting the card. With a low bow he held open the door and proceeded to usher the visitor down the wide hall. Beyond the great staircase was a closed door upon which he knocked discreetly before throwing it open.

Kent paused on the threshold and for a long moment the two men looked at one another in silent appraisal. Armaund Lamont had risen from the huge padded leather chair in which he had been sunk and he stood now in front of it on the far side of the room, nervously fingering the caller's card. He was a very different Lamont from the confident, advice-giving gentleman who had offered assistance to Henry Radcliffe's daughter a few days ago. A certain air of self-reliance which he had then possessed seemed to have vanished with the neatness of his dress. As he stood there in dressing-gown and slippers, collarless, unshaved, his thick black hair unbrushed and moustache uncurled he looked positively untidy. It needed only his bloodshot eyes and the decanter of cognac on the tray beside the chair to complete the impression of a man who had lost his nerve. His eyes shifted uneasily from Kent's. He waved his guest to a chair and was turning to the tray when the novelist stopped him with a gesture of refusal.

"I am not making a social call, Mr. Lamont, or I should not have been so insistent that you see me," said Kent

as he seated himself. "I called at your office this morning and your secretary informed me that you had gone out of town for ten days. Your man at the door likewise insisted that you were not at home." Lamont held out his hands, palms upwards, and sank back into the big armchair. "You admit me only when I write upon my card: 'The black shadow of the château is creeping far beyond the old bridge.' It is about that we will talk, if you please."

"I do not understand you, Mr. Kent. It is because I do not understand that I admit you on my privacy, is it not?—to ask why you write these so strange words. It may be that you have gone—how do you say it in the slang?—like a nut? See, I am worried to know."

"The nut is hard enough to crack without you trying to make it more difficult for me, Mr. Lamont. Why this foolish pretence?"

"My dear Mr. Kent, please! I do not understand."

"Yes, you do!" contradicted Addison Kent sharply. "I have come here to ask you some questions and I want honest answers. Where is Mrs. Stanton?"

A startled look came into the Frenchman's eyes and Kent watched the fingers of his right hand close about the card which they still held till it was crushed in the tight clenched fist.

"Mrs. Stanton?" he echoed vacuously.

"Exactly—Mrs. Stanton, the lady who sews for Miss Radcliffe. Where is she? You know."

"But no, Mr. Kent—that is not so. How should I know where Miss Radcliffe's sewing lady is? Is she not at her place?"

"She is not at Hillcrest, nor at the Stokes home where she has a room," replied Kent. "I have just come from there. She mailed them a postcard to say she was ill and was remaining in the city with a friend for a few days' rest. She has not been seen since the inquest. She had an appointment to meet you—promised to tell you something important that would interest you—"

He paused as Armaund Lamont leaped to his feet in sudden agitation. During this speech the jeweler's fat face had paled. His bloodshot eyes were full of apprehension as he stared. The flaccid pouches beneath them were dark from sleeplessness. He paced up the room and back, gesturing, muttering to himself.

"It has come! It has come! *Mon dieu!*" he whispered hoarsely.

"What has come?" demanded Kent.

"We had business to transact—yes. After the inquest—yes. But she had her good health when she left my office, Mr. Kent, and she was going straight out to Westchester. She has no friends in the city to go on a visit—"

"Are you sure? The postcard was genuine. You think she may have written it—under compulsion?"

Lamont nodded miserably. There was nothing simulated in the apprehension which lurked in his restless eyes.

"It is the château! the accursed château!" he mumbled. He stared at Addison Kent with hollow, frightened eyes. His voice sank to a whisper. "It means—death!"

"The Château du Vieux Pont? Be more explicit, Mr. Lamont."

But with a muttered imprecation Armaund Lamont fell back a step in astonishment.

"You know?" he gasped. "What do you know? Answer quickly. For God's sake, Mr. Kent—how much are you aware?"

"Enough to make it advisable for you to be frank with me, Lamont," said Kent firmly. "Now, first of all, what is this woman to you?"

"You must cease asking the questions—I cannot answer," protested the Frenchman, but the expression which crossed his face answered for him. "She is good—all that is good and pure and true. Ah, she is—!" He broke off abruptly and almost ran to lay an excited hand upon his visitor's shoulder. "We must do something! We must find her—so quickly as possible! You hear? Before it is too late, we must find her!"

"Then sit down and answer my questions," urged Kent. "You have nothing to lose and everything to gain by it. I am here to help you."

"Ah, if only that could be, my friend!" cried Armaund Lamont with a gesture of despair. He dropped disconsolately into the armchair again. "Alas! I can say—nothing."

"You will not tell me what you know?—even when it may mean the safety of the woman you love—? Oh, I am not blind, Mr. Lamont."

"I can not—Ah, Mr. Kent, I believe you want to help but that you cannot do! You can never undo what is done, is it not? I would speak if I could do so; but that I dare not do."

“Why?”

“It is not—for a secret that belongs to me. But one whisper from me to you and it would be—the end!”

“Utter nonsense, Lamont! You refuse to talk, then?”

“Can you not see that it must be so?” cried Lamont miserably.

“Then perhaps you will listen while I say something,” said Kent, his jaw set. “I tell you nothing new very likely, but it may serve to freshen your memory. The Château du Vieux Pont is one of those old relics of the feudal days which still stand in the Ile de France. When it was built in the fourteenth century by Henri d’Albrêt it was surrounded by the forest. Years ago it was abandoned and the owners of the surrounding lands have taken so little interest in their property that the whole section of the country thereabouts has retrograded into a wilderness that is almost primitive. You can see the Château du Vieux Pont from the road that runs between the village of Sainte-Genevieve and Monthery. There is an old inn of the coaching days still standing and offering hospitality to passing wagoners; but it is, on the whole, not a part of the country where one would wish to linger if sociably inclined. I can imagine even that its twisted beeches and oaks, centuries old, might strike terror to the hearts of the timid when the clouds were scudding past the moon and that in the season of mud, cold rains, rotting leaves and overcast skies it might provide a fitting theatre for—strange things, Mr. Lamont.”

Kent’s eyes were alight with eagerness as they fastened

upon every changing expression of the pallid face before him. Lamont, his lips slightly parted, was breathing quickly with suppressed excitement. A little shudder passed through him; but he said not a word—merely stared with red-lidded eyes that burned with insomnia.

“That part of the country, as I say, has few inhabitants,” continued Kent. “There are some small houses beside the road going to Corbeil and a village of charcoal burners on the highroad to Epinay; but the Château of the Old Bridge stands in a lonesome stretch of wooded country. There is one other old château not far away which was going to ruin also until an eccentric English savant and his wife took it over as a place of retirement and came there to live. I refer to the Château des Hêtres and to Professor William Winterby, F.R.S.”

“Ah!” breathed Armaund Lamont. His black eyes glittered in the white of his big face.

“It was to visit Professor Winterby and his wife that Henry Radcliffe went some twenty years ago—shortly after his marriage. In fact, he was on his honeymoon. He and his bride were very happy together. It was a fine place to go for a honeymoon—the Château des Hêtres; for lovers provide their own companionship and it is all-sufficient.”

Kent paused.

“Shall I go on, Lamont? Will you talk now about what happened at the Château du Vieux Pont?” He leaned forward and spoke in a low, tense voice. “Will you tell me why Henry Radcliffe came back to America—

without his bride? Perhaps you will tell me why the shadow of that château is so black—why it has crept so far that after all these years it reaches even to New York—to Hillcrest—and strikes terror to the heart of one whom you say is all that is good and pure and true! Why do you cringe from honest questions? What have you to hide? Answer me, Armaund Lamont! What have you to hide?”

The Frenchman leaped to his feet, his eyes blazing.

“I refuse to answer!” he cried with spirit. “Who are you to come here—in my home—and torment me so? It is that I should have you thrown out! You do not ask these so many strange things by any right. I answer you not! *Sacré!* you make me all mad! Go! Go! Leave me with myself!”

“My right to ask these questions is the right of justice. I will not cease to ask them until justice is done, Armaund Lamont!” warned Kent. “I am here as the friend of Miss Radcliffe and of the late Henry Radcliffe, her father. I am here because I am on the trail of Alceste and will not rest until I run him down—”

“*Mille tonneurs!* No, no!”

“—for then I will learn who is the *man* who shot Henry Radcliffe to death!”

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SOUNDLESS BULLET

“**H**USH! Hush! Not a word of that, Mr. Kent! You must keep silence immediately!” cried Lamont, hastening towards him, finger to his lips in warning. “*Mon dieu!* you must not say such things!” His frightened glance travelled about the room as if he half expected to see an enemy springing upon them from nowhere.

“Why not?” demanded Addison Kent, reaching for a cigarette and lighting it with an amusement which he made no attempt to hide.

“It is too much dangerous! That is why.” The jeweler mopped the perspiration from his forehead with a plump hand that trembled. He was not feigning fear. He was really afraid—terribly afraid.

“Come, Mr. Lamont, you must not allow yourself to imagine so freely,” said Kent more seriously. “There is nobody here except you and me—and that man of yours. Is there?”

“But no—of course not! But one is never sure—You must get away from here as soon as immediately.”

“That is pretty soon,” Kent admitted easily; but he made no move to go. “Why such haste? What are you afraid of?”

"Ah, you ask more questions. Everything I fear. Everybody I shun. I am in very great danger. Everyone who comes here is in danger. I cannot explain, but it is so and you must leave here without being seen, Mr. Kent. My word is given you that it is wisest."

"I do not scare very easily, Lamont—"

"If you were to be heard talking such fool things as you have said here to me you would not have time to scare, my friend. You would be too dead all over!"

Kent looked at him in wonder; for it was evident that Lamont really believed what he said. Then the novelist laughed quietly.

"Is it as bad as that?"

"Worse, I do assure you, sir."

"What I have been saying I can repeat at will. And it is not foolish talk, Lamont. I mean every word of it."

"But yes, it is foolish," insisted the other. "You do not know what you say. The police are right and she is a bad woman they have captured. She deserves to die!"

"So you know Mrs. Saint-Anton also, eh?" asked Kent with quickened interest. "Tell me about her."

Armaund Lamont paid no attention to the question, however. He was anxious only to be rid of his visitor as quickly as possible and he stepped to the door and clapped his hands smartly.

"Ho, my Mokra! Tell Pierre he will make ready the limousine at once with the blinds drawn down and wait in the garage. His passenger soon will enter by the garage. *Vite! Vite! Il se fait tard!*"

"Blinds drawn, eh?" mused Kent, his eyes narrowed

as he drew on his cigarette. "Danger with all the trimmings!"

"Ah, Mr. Kent, you do not know how I am so anxious. I cannot explain. New York is big and many strange things happen every day. It is better to take care. How do you say it in the slang?—my goat is stolen?"

"So is that wonderful collar of pearls," Kent chuckled.

"*Sacré!*" cried Armaund Lamont. "Truly. It is very strange, that."

"This Alceste is a clever devil, Mr. Lamont. Have you any idea how the thing was done?"

"I do not know. There they are—*Pouf!*—Here they are not! It is done in a twinkling, is it not? Perhaps if I give him back the question, Mr. Kent himself will tell me how to do it?" His black eyes looked intently through half closed, reddened lids.

"Did you open the parcel Miss Radcliffe gave you?—before you left Hillcrest, I mean?"

"I did not."

"You handed it to the detective who was to accompany you—when?"

"Miss Radcliffe brought me the parcel in the brown paper when dinner was over a little while. I gave it to Mr. McVey then."

"And it was not out of his hands until you were riding into town with it. You yourself carried it on your knees. The loss was not discovered until you were in this house, about to put the pearls into your vault here. Is that correct?"

"Quite correct, Mr. Kent."

"Then the theft was done in one of two places and at one of two times. Either the pearls were removed from the parcel while it was in Miss Radcliffe's room, wrapped up ready for you, or they disappeared—after you got home!"

"Im—possible!" gasped Lamont. Then his face flushed with a quick anger that left it very white as he strode across the room in great excitement. "You dare to say—even that, sir!" he panted.

"Even what?" Kent smiled and blew a cloud of smoke into the face that scowled down on him.

"That I—Armaund Lamont—stole them?"

"Sit down, Lamont! I did not say so," cried Kent sharply.

"You will go, please—now. I wish to be with myself. It grows late and the car is waiting."

Kent stood up. He deposited the butt of the cigarette in the ash-tray and appraised the other for a moment in silence. Then without a word he accepted his hat, cane and gloves and followed the nervous master of the house to a rear door through which they could reach the garage unobserved.

"Pierre will take you where you want to go—anywhere but to your own apartment. He will not go there in fear that someone follows. It is well that you do my wishes in this matter."

"Mr. Lamont," said Kent as he paused with one foot on the running-board of the limousine, "I am sorry you have not seen fit to be frank with me. Think it over. I

will call again. If I can be of any assistance in helping you to find the lady—”

“I will do the finding myself.”

“But you will at least report—”

“Nothing. I bid you good-night,” and he bowed coldly and turned away abruptly.

Addison Kent's eyes puckered with tolerant amusement as he took up the speaking-tube and gave directions to the chauffeur. He turned on the little electric light in the roof of the luxuriously upholstered car, glanced at his watch, put the light out again and relaxed on the cushions. The hour was near midnight.

That the novelist credited most of Mr. Armaund Lamont's excitability to a volatile temperament and did not take very seriously the fears which the Frenchman had expressed was apparent a few moments later. The car had no sooner glided smoothly into the street and got out of sight of the Lamont residence than Kent raised all the blinds and opened the windows. The gratifying breeze created by swift motion blew coolly against his face. He did not mind humoring a victim of “nerves,” but not to the point of discomfort.

With an idea that he might step into Delmonico's or Sherry's or perhaps look in at the Players' he had asked the chauffeur to run him down the avenue as far as 44th Street. At 60th Street, in sight of St. Gaudens's bronze statue of Sherman and his horse on its polished granite pedestal, he suddenly changed his mind.

“I've decided to go home, Pierre,” he said through the speaking-tube. “Cut through the park to Riverside

Drive and take your time. There's no rush on such a fine night. You may drop me at 82nd and I'll walk the rest of the way."

The night was fresh with the sweet breath of flowers and growing vegetation in the vicinity of Central Park. At that hour particularly the place offered restful solitude. The peaceful sylvan setting was conducive to meditation and Addison Kent was soon deep in thought as they rolled along at a leisurely pace. The broad winding driveways, which at certain times presented a constant procession of fashionable equippages, motor cars of all descriptions and equestrians, were practically deserted. Only one powerful touring car, turning in through the southeast entrance, overtook the big brass-trimmed limousine, slowly edged its way past, then went cutting off ahead in a burst of impatient speed till it vanished around the next turn.

Lamont's chauffeur grinned spitefully after the irritated driver. Some people were never satisfied with anything less than the whole road apparently. He continued to smile as he recalled the altercation he had had over the rights of the road—last Sunday when he had been out with Marie. Pierre thought quite frequently of Marie when he was not too busy and as he dawdled through the park he allowed his mind to roam far away along paths of Romance. He was many blocks up Riverside Drive before he came to a full realization of his surroundings just in time to stop the car at 82nd Street according to instructions.

"We are here, monsieur," he called, swinging briskly down from his seat out in front.

He took hold of the handle of the monogramed door, but did not open it immediately. In the light from the electric standard nearby he saw something which drove every vestige of color from his cheeks. He stared downward with alarmed eyes. Beneath the closed door was seeping slowly a thin dark streak of liquid which widened upon the corrugated rubber tread of the running-board.

He gave a sudden cry of horror, pulled the door open—and recoiled, aghast. His passenger lay sprawled upon the cushions, head and shoulders fallen inertly forward over the edge. Upon the delicately patterned taffeta shirt was an ugly crimson stain where a bullet-hole showed plainly.

Shot! Why? How? When? There had been no sound of a shot!

In sudden panic the chauffeur slammed the limousine door, leaped to his seat and went tearing madly off into the leafy, night-hushed vista.

CHAPTER XIX

MENACE UNBELIEVABLE

WHEN Addison Kent came to his senses he gazed with mild wonder at a little white-starched cap above a pleasant ruddy face.

"Where am I?" he asked in a weak voice.

"You are in the James B. Yates Memorial Hospital," replied the smiling nurse. She reached out and pushed an electric button which summoned the house-surgeon on duty. "You were brought by Mr. Lamont's chauffeur," she went on as if divining the questions he would ask. "It is now half after three in the morning. You are not to talk—just rest. The wound is nothing to be alarmed about—if you remain quiet."

She turned as the house-surgeon came softly through the doorway of the private room to which the midnight patient had been allotted. For a moment they whispered together, then the young doctor came quietly to the bedside and smiled cheerfully as he placed his cool soft fingers upon the wrist that lay outside the coverlet and felt the pulse. He looked very smart and clean in his white coat and white starched dickie that fitted snugly at the throat.

"You are feeling better. You will feel better still after a good sleep." Neither in tone or manner was

any hint of the curiosity which the case must have aroused in him.

Kent winced with the pain in his upper arm, which was swathed in neat bandages. There was a bandage about his head also; his head ached and throbbed and he felt somewhat dizzy and weak. He relaxed impotently.

"I have been—shot?"

"Evidently. The bullet struck you on the head—a glancing contact fortunately—and passed through the upper arm. It just missed the humerus; but has torn the muscles of the *brachialis anticus* and biceps rather badly in its downward course."

"Downward! From a tree!" muttered the patient.

"It was the blow on the head which caused coma, Mr. Kent."

"How long does this—lay me up, Doctor—?"

"Brown. Oh, not long—four or five days, maybe."

"Four or five days!" echoed Kent in a dismayed whisper. He rolled his head on the pillow, frowning irritation. "Great Scott! Why, doc, I have to be out of here to-morrow—to-day, I mean—without fail!" he protested.

"Very well, then," soothed the house-surgeon. "Have a good sleep now and we'll see about it in the morning."

"I want to see Thomas Traynor—"

"Yes, in the morning. Everything will be arranged in the morning, Mr. Kent. No more talking, please," warned Doctor Brown, "or you won't be out of here for a week. Try not to think. Try to rest. Nurse Andrews will fix you up."

Although the hospital was not a large one and its accommodations were limited, the appointments were excellent. Kent had been in rare good luck that private quarters were available and that he had been recognized both by his cardcase and from sundry excellent half-tone photo-engravings which had appeared recently in the magazines. The regular hospital staff was too small and too busy to be in constant attendance upon private patients—even a famous author like Mr. Addison Kent. His case, however, was not critical enough to require the calling in of a special nurse and the result was that the following morning he was left alone in his room for lengthy intervals.

He had had the "good sleep" which Dr. Brown had prescribed and he was feeling very much better. His wounds were easier and he felt so much stronger that he had been able to argue with spirit when the Superintendent informed him bluntly that he could not leave the hospital for at least three days. Kent finally had demanded the presence of his friend, Traynor, as soon as he could be notified.

It was while he was waiting in no very gracious mood for Tommy's arrival that the day nurse came in and informed him that a gentleman had called to enquire after him and wished to see him somewhat urgently—a Lieutenant Fargey, of the police.

"Send him right up! Good!" cried Kent. "And Nurse—you might just see that we are not disturbed for a little while, eh?" He smiled and nodded. Presently he heard an approaching footstep and turned his head eagerly towards the door,

But it was not Lieutenant Robert Fargey who entered. The man was a total stranger. Kent smiled at him.

"The right church but the wrong pew?" he suggested. "Who are you looking for?"

"I do not go to church; but my business takes me to the cemetery occasionally and I know an open grave when I see it," replied the stranger solemnly.

"Undertaker, eh? Well, friend, you'll have to look elsewhere. You'll find the nurse outside there some place," and he turned away in dismissal.

"I have taken the precaution to notify the nurse that we wish to be left alone, Mr. Kent."

Addison Kent half sat up in his bed and stared intently. The words alone were sufficiently disconcerting, but the tone of them—! Yet—

"You wish to see me?—to talk to me? May I ask whom I have the honor of addressing?"

"You may ask what you like. It does not follow that your curiosity will be satisfied."

"See here, sir! I am expecting a visitor—Lieutenant Fargey, of the Police Department—who may be in here any minute. He's on his way upstairs now—"

The sardonic smile with which this was received stopped him. The man had a black Van Dyke beard and his mouth was partly hidden by his moustache beneath which his teeth gleamed whitely.

"I am surprised that the clever Mr. Kent is not more astute," he sneered. "For the purposes of the occasion I am 'Lieutenant Fargey'."

A moment of silence followed. The author's keen eyes

narrowed in concentrated study of the intruder. Something oddly familiar in the figure eluded his memory. Then as his gaze lifted once more to the face a sudden thrill of apprehension stirred him. It was the eyes—peculiar, light blue eyes—buttony, cruel, the whites as hard and dead as eyes of glass!

The visitor approached the bed slowly, hands in the pockets of his coat, a grim smile on his compressed lips as he watched the flicker of a dawning recognition on the face of the wounded man.

“You are surprised to see me, no doubt? I am always surprising people.”

“Say, look here, what the devil do you want? And who told you I was here?” He sank back on the pillow, his blanched face tense, eyes alert, husbanding his strength.

“It is my business to know things—certain things, Mr. Addison Kent,” came the low, unctuous voice. He nodded at the bandages. “You shook dice with Death last night when you called on Friend Lamont! You are meddling too freely for your own good!”

Kent shrank involuntarily from the look of intense hatred that accompanied the words; it played lambently in those evil eyes.

“You get right out of here.”

“You annoy me exceedingly!” Quick-spoken words, vibrant with passion! “So—!”

Kent’s fascinated gaze was bent upon the hands in the pockets. At the first movement he seized the pillow—

almost automatically as he caught the glint of polished nickel and saw the hypodermic needle.

"Help!" he yelled at the top of his voice.

As they talked he had been edging imperceptibly to the far side of the bed and working the sheets loose with his feet. Now as his cry rang through the ward he cast the pillow in the malignant face and slid like a flash from beneath the covers just as the lunging arm struck, burying the needle harmlessly in the empty bed.

The instant his feet hit the floor Kent dashed past for the door and out into the corridor. Wild-eyed, he pointed back into the room.

"The man in there—who called to see me—is an imposter! I want him arrested! Quick! Arrest him! He has just tried to kill me!"

Pell mell, they rushed through the doorway. Then they stopped and stared at each other foolishly. The room was empty! The nurses exchanged meaning glances.

Kent knew they did not believe him—that to them it meant merely that he had fallen asleep and had a wild dream or else that he was delirious. He pointed to the open window and the fire-escape and sank exhausted on the bed. The reaction swept in upon him; he trembled from head to foot and for a moment nearly fainted.

He was still looking white and miserable when Traynor arrived. The news of Kent's whereabouts had been a shock to his friend who had remained at the apartment in Minaki Annex until a late hour the evening before, impatiently awaiting the novelist's return. He had

sought him there again first thing in the morning without success, adding this new anxiety to the anxiety he was harboring already in regard to Rose Radcliffe.

That anxiety had been born as he listened to the perplexed voice of Miss Marjory Struthers who had called him on the telephone from Long Island to say that Rose had not arrived there, although her trunks had come. The Struthers car had met every train and she could not understand it. On calling up Hillcrest she had learned from the valet that his mistress had left that morning for Woodland Cove on the north shore as instructed in a telegram which purported to come from Marjory Struthers herself. Miss Struthers had despatched no such message!

"I don't like the looks of it, Ad," Traynor concluded with worry lines in his forehead. "Where could she have gone? I haven't reported this to Fargey yet; but I certainly am going to have that wire traced—"

"That is already being done, old man," Kent interrupted. "I was out at Hillcrest yesterday and I sent Thompson on a scouting trip to Woodland Cove—just to make sure everything was all right."

"Then you were anticipating—something?"

"Not until I heard of the wire, after Miss Radcliffe had reached the end of her train journey. I thought it rather strange that Miss Struthers should wire when she could talk on the 'phone to much better advantage; she usually calls up, long-distance, so Thompson informed me. I tried to raise her, but she was out."

"What do you think has happened?"

"Miss Radcliffe has likely been met by a touring car at WoodlandCove; but it did not belong to Struthers-holme."

"Then who—? Good heavens!" cried Traynor in alarm. "You mean—she has been abducted?"

"I think it very likely. Now, don't get excited. I don't think she is in danger of physical harm."

"But you—" He pointed to the bandages. "You might have been killed!"

"They look upon me as dangerous," smiled Kent. "It is all the proof I need that I am getting too close to them for their peace of mind. They will work fast from now on; but we must work faster—Oh, hang the luck!" cried Kent in exasperation. "To think that I have to be laid up like an old woman with rheumatism just when—Tommy, I've got to get out of here! I want you to get busy with an ambulance—taxi—anything! 'Phone Mrs. Madden that I'm coming over right away. Get your own things moved over to the Annex; you're all the nurse I need and we'll lick them yet! I've been to the Commissioner—"

"Of Police?"

"Yes, yes. I will explain everything, once I'm home. Every resource of the police is back of us. I must talk to Fargey. I want you to go to Lamont's house—"

"I was there this morning to see what had become of you."

"You saw Lamont?"

"No. That's something I had to tell you. I found Mokra all worked up into a fine state of woollies because

his master had gone out with a stranger in the middle of the night and had not returned."

The concern in Addison Kent's face deepened at the news. He scowled in silence, thinking; two flush spots burned in his cheeks.

"The showdown is coming even faster than I expected." He looked intently into his friend's eager face and spoke with an impressive earnestness that construed the seriousness of the situation. "Tommy, this is no Sunday School picnic you're heading into. It looks as if an organized gang is working, though I can't be sure of that yet. But one thing is certain—the men with whom we have to deal will stop at nothing. They are nervy and have the cunning of the devil himself. I must warn you that in mixing up with it you are taking the same risks as I am—"

"You know better than to waste time on that!" protested Traynor sternly.

"Very well. Last night I was shot from a tree in Central Park with a rifle that carried a Maxim silencer. This morning one of them actually visited me here and tried to finish the job with a hypodermic injection of quick-acting poison—"

"No!" gasped Traynor in disbelief. "Not right here?"

"The venom of a hamadryad, the deadliest snake of the East," nodded Kent. "Men bold enough to take such risks are dangerous and we'll have to be careful of every move we make."

"Was it anyone you knew?" asked Traynor in some awe.

“Yes, a man whom I had suspected already of being mixed up in this thing somewhere—a man whom you, too, have been inclined to doubt. It was our erstwhile friend, Roger Levering.

CHAPTER XX

ADDISON KENT LETS FALL HIS MANTLE

A FEW hours later Addison Kent was in his own apartment, lying back with a sigh of contentment in his own bed. The very sight of the familiar things about him did him good and the success with which his removal from the hospital had been accomplished seemed to belie the dire predictions of the Superintendent. That excited official had washed his hands openly of the whole affair, refusing to accept any responsibility for the consequences.

In Kent's mind, however, nothing that could happen to himself balanced the vital necessity of an immediate talk with Traynor in order that Tommy might act intelligently in the crisis with which they were faced. Something of the seriousness of the situation the novelist managed to convey to his own physician who had been called in; nevertheless, Dr. Harvey shook his head disapprovingly at Mrs. Madden as he took his leave after giving her instructions.

As soon as Traynor had settled himself alongside the bed to listen, Kent began with the letter he had received some time ago from his friend, Superintendent Brownlee, of Scotland Yard, in regard to Alceste who was supposed to be heading for the United States after several bold

thefts on the Continent. He had vanished completely about six months ago after a daring robbery in Norfolk. Scotland Yard had reason to believe he had left the country and reports from Paris were likewise negative. The police of Europe had co-operated to run him down but had failed in their efforts because they had so little information that could be relied upon regarding him; of his "works" they knew much, but of the man himself they knew almost nothing at all. The cunning with which he planned every little detail, the skill and boldness with which he executed every manoeuvre, his elusiveness, the wide knowledge which he seemed to possess—these all pointed to the master mind of a well educated criminal, probably of diseased mentality—a paranoiac,—the most dangerous sort of criminal whom the police have to combat.

Superintendent Brownlee's letter to Addison Kent was entirely outside the official warnings which had been sent through the regular police channels. In the past Kent had been of some assistance to the Superintendent on two or three occasions in connection with certain delicate matters that had been handled *ex-officio* and Superintendent Brownlee was not one to overlook a trump card in a game with an expert like this Alceste. Accordingly he had sought privately the co-operation of Addison Kent and Kent in turn had had a very private interview with the Commissioner. Following this interview, steps had been taken to set a special watch upon certain famous gems throughout the country; for, if Alceste really were on this side of the Atlantic, there was no knowing

where he would strike,—which particular bonanza had lured him.

All this, of course, was long before the events at Hillcrest. Things had been going along quietly without the least indication of anything unusual in justification of all the precautions that had been taken. Then a rumor got into the papers that part of the crown jewels of a certain bankrupt kingdom in Europe were being thrown on the market and private word at last had reached Addison Kent that Henry C. Radcliffe had acquired, secretly, the two most valuable items offered,—the diamond necklace and the queen's collar of pearls.

In his pleasure over his latest purchase Henry Radcliffe had not been able to resist the temptation of keeping the jewels beside him for a while; he had argued, no doubt, that as nobody knew he had them, the risk he took for a week or two was not great. That he was indeed mistaken the tragic sequel had proven.

"There is no doubt in my mind that Alceste committed the robbery," said Kent, his brows wrinkled in a thoughtful frown. "I am at a loss to account for the murder, though, Tommy. I am inclined to agree with Bob Fargey that the two are separate and distinct from one another—that is, that the robbery was planned with no thought of murder and that if the same hand did both, the latter was entirely fortuitous. Yet the robbery occurred in the library downstairs, the shooting in the bedroom, and if Alceste climbed the fire-escape to shoot into Henry Radcliffe's room, that certainly would indicate premeditation on his part. It is not the sort of thing his

record would lead one to expect of him; therefore, I do not think Alceste is guilty in this connection. The fact that he invariably plays a lone hand in his depredations is another point in his favor.

“Against this argument must be pointed out the unlikelihood of a big robbery and a murder occurring in the same house on the same night by the hands of different individuals not connected in any way and without each other’s knowledge and co-operation. We are therefore forced to the conclusion that for once Alceste has broken his rule and used an accomplice,—perhaps as a lookout—and that this accomplice did the shooting. We are at once faced with two alternatives—either that the man who shot Radcliffe did so because he was afraid of discovery during the robbery or that he was actuated by some motive of his own, entirely unconnected with the theft of the crown jewels. This uncovers a pretty wide canvas.

“We come now to a consideration of the specific. Let me recapitulate for a moment. The coroner sets the hour between one and two o’clock in the morning, nearer two. It was at two o’clock or thereabouts that Rose Radcliffe tapped on her father’s door. The hands of your watch pointed to 1.55 when you pulled it from beneath your pillow after finding nobody in sight on the fire-escape. You had just seen the face of a man in the moonlight, glancing in at your window, after you had been awakened by the shot; for undoubtedly it was that which did awaken you. So that the shooting took place within ten minutes of two. You heard Miss Radcliffe’s

light knock on her father's door, heard the rustle of garments out in the hall and likewise inside the room, followed by a smothered cry which took you to the door just in time to see Miss Radcliffe descending the stairs. You naturally thought it was she you had heard. You followed her down to the library and while you were there the third person inside the room had plenty of time to escape, for Miss Radcliffe found her father's door locked at that time and did not enter the room, proving that someone unknown was responsible for the little cry of terror which led you to spring from bed to investigate. Many things may have happened while you were downstairs.

"Well, then, the shooting had just taken place; yet neither Miss Radcliffe nor you noted anything amiss in the library. It is evident, therefore, that the robbery occurred later in the night and that would seem to contradict our first idea altogether and establish it as a fact that the murder and the theft of the jewels were indeed two separate events, happening in the one night in the same house. You note how we are travelling in a circle and getting nowhere when we try to reach a solution of the shooting with Alceste as the hypothesis.

"One thing, however, seems pretty clear—that the shot came from the fire-escape. The carefully obliterated finger-prints on the freshly painted iron grating and rail, together with the holes in the heavy velour window drape, point definitely in that direction. The persons in the room, therefore, did not kill Mr. Radcliffe. So—"

"Persons?" interrupted Traynor, who had been listening with the closest attention.

"Yes—at least two, possibly three, different people visited that room during the night—after the shooting had taken place and each for different reasons. One of them was with Henry Radcliffe when he met his death—was having a secret interview with him which ended in a disagreement. Another entered to write the message on the shirt-cuff—"

"To—to what?"

"Write the message on the shirt-cuff," Kent repeated calmly. "The third person removed the cuff. It is possible that two entrys were made by one person, but I have reason for believing that a third individual was on the scene."

"You mean—you suspect a frame-up? Against Mrs. Saint-Anton? Good heavens!" cried Traynor in amazement. "What makes you think that? You do not believe her guilty?"

"No. She was one of the three—in the excitement of her arrest she admitted being in the room, you may remember—but I do not believe she is guilty of the present charge against her. However, she has been concealing something undoubtedly and her arrest is a step in the right direction. I fancy it was she who was present when the shot was fired from outside the window and while it does not necessarily follow that she saw and recognized the man, it is possible that she may be able to throw considerable light upon the matter. She will prove to be an important factor in convicting the murderer, if he is brought to trial; for she is the only eye-witness of the crime."

"Yet Bob Fargey has worked up a strong case against her," ventured Traynor. "He has suspected this woman from the first—"

"And not without reason, Tommy. I admit that her actions have been very suspicious and I believe she may be involved. But the laws of New York look askance at mere circumstantial evidence and I have an idea that Fargey was playing for more direct evidence when he arrested this woman. In spite of his abnormal appreciation of his own abilities, Bob really is shrewder than you might think."

"I don't know, Ad; I've been at murder trials where the circumstantial evidence led straight to a conviction and a confession. While it's true that circumstances can combine in very strange ways sometimes to put a person in a false position, I don't know that this happens any oftener than the accused suffers from the direct testimony of a lying witness."

"You are voicing the belief of Jack Murray—you remember him in connection with those murder cases we both reported in Middlesex? Not only was he the greatest detective the Ontario Government ever had, but I go so far as to say that few have ever surpassed him in a practical way anywhere." Traynor nodded approval. "I had a long talk with him once about circumstantial evidence and he believed in it. He told me that he had sometimes been lucky enough to detect the liar, then the lie, and learned the whole truth simply by listening to the lie and thereby judging the truth. Few people are good liars because they don't know where to stop; they

make their lies too probable. That is what has happened in the present case.

"What a minute now. You remember what the chore-boy on a certain farm once did in order to find a horse that had strayed away. After the neighborhood had been thoroughly searched without success and everybody had given it up as a bad job, 'Fat' strolled off by himself on Sunday afternoon and came back with the missing animal. When everybody wanted to know how he found the stray—for he was something of a lout and they were surprised—he said with a grin, 'Why, I just thought if I was a horse, where would I go. An' I went there, and he had!'

"So, Tommy, just imagine you are Mrs. Saint-Anton, have killed a man and have discovered that tell-tale shirt-cuff and ripped it off. What's the first thing you are going to do? Destroy it just as completely and as fast as you know how! Isn't it? Are you going to smuggle it upstairs into your steamer trunk beside your automatic pistol and keep the both of them as treasured souvenirs to hand down to your grandchildren?"

"Hardly," laughed Traynor.

"Well, then, was her surprise that it was found in her trunk genuine or not? She cried out that she had never seen the thing before and demanded to know how it had got into her trunk. It got there because it was put there! Why was it put there if not to cast suspicion upon her? Who would do it if not the criminal himself or an accomplice?"

"What makes you think he both wrote the message and

tore it off?" asked Traynor excitedly. "He could have returned to the room and discovered it. The message may be genuine and if that's the case, your argument—"

"The message is a forgery," insisted Kent. "Fargey's handwriting expert is not prepared to swear that the signature is not a clever forgery. But your own common sense should tell you that the thing has been overdone. Does a man whose life is ebbing away so rapidly that he cannot call for help or crawl to the door write a precisely worded message with a perfect signature to substantiate it or does he scrawl a fragmentary sentence with weakening fingers that make it trail out to wavering and meaningless marks?"

"But why should he tear it off instead of leaving it there for the police to find?"

"I did not say that the murderer tore it off," was the surprising reply. "He was content to leave it there for the police."

"Then, who did?"

"The third person who visited the room."

"But, hold on, Ad," objected Traynor in perplexity, "that would mean that this third person hid it in the trunk and you said the criminal himself did that."

"So he did— Wait, now! You are overlooking a lot of things that have made it very difficult to arrive at the truth of what happened. Since I saw you last I have made some fresh discoveries." Kent winced with pain as he shifted to a more comfortable position. "I have told you about the secret stairway that gave access to the room through the wardrobe panel; the luck was with me

when I found that. The daub of luminous paint at the head of that stair could mean only one thing—that our friend, the lady ghost, had passed that way. She is the third person who knows more of what actually occurred that night than she has seen fit to admit.”

“Who? Who?”

“Give me time, Tommy. It was she who gave that muffled cry which took you out of your bed. She was inside the room then—had just discovered the body. It was she who tore off the shirt-cuff and fled—by way of the secret passage that admitted her to the trunk room on the third floor.”

“And slipped the cuff into the steamer trunk?”

“No, I don’t think she did. She remained in the trunk room for a little while, no doubt in great agitation and planning what was best to do. She decided at last to venture boldly downstairs in her ghostly disguise and trust to that to enable her to escape from the house unmolested. Meanwhile you had followed Miss Radcliffe to the library and were back in your own room; you came out a second time and saw the ‘ghost’ descending. She escaped through the garden gate while you and Levering were having your little tussle.”

“Who was it?” demanded Traynor impatiently.

“The message on the cuff will help you to guess,” smiled Kent, enjoying his friend’s excitement. “It read, you will remember, ‘Woman known as Mrs. St. Anton shot me.’ Is it necessary for me to remind you that the period after the abbreviation was very faint and that

the capital 'A' was wobbly? If you read it all together as one word—"

"Mrs. Stanton!" Traynor leaned forward in his excitement. "Great Scott! the seamstress! I never thought of her!"

"It is quite clear why she removed the cuff, of course. She thought the name written there was 'Stanton'. Her actions are puzzling in the extreme. To begin with, why was she masquerading in the house as an outlandish ghost at an hour when she was supposed to be in her bed at the Stokes place away down in the park? How was it that she alone knew of the hidden passage into Henry Radcliffe's room and why was she going there? Once there, discovering the body on the floor, why did she not raise an instant alarm? Is it possible that she saw the deed committed and is shielding the murderer? Above all, if she is innocent of complicity, why did she not go to the police with the shirt-cuff? Why was she afraid that the message would incriminate her? To say the least, she has acted most foolishly."

"I should say so!" nodded Traynor. "Mrs. Stanton—Well, I'll be—! It looks bad, doesn't it? If she didn't put the shirt-cuff in that trunk, she must know who did—be in league with him, in fact; for she must have given him the thing."

"She did not give it to him. It was stolen from her on Sunday night. She took it home with her and hid it in a little Japanese box in which she kept certain personal belongings under lock and key. While she remained at Hillcrest that evening, according to police

orders, a man who passed himself off as a detective, called at the Stokes bungalow, pretending to have been sent over from Hillcrest by Mrs. Stanton to inform Mrs. Stokes of her intention to remain at Hillcrest all night—and requesting that Mrs. Stokes give the Japanese box out of the bureau drawer to the bearer of the message. This man showed Mrs. Stokes his police badge; but he was no detective. He was the man who placed the shirt-cuff in the steamer trunk, beyond a doubt, proving that the interference with his plan to incriminate Mrs. Saint-Anton had been entirely unforeseen and that he was determined to carry it out at all hazards.”

“How did he know who had removed the cuff?”

“He did not know—until Sunday night. I imagine he must have spent some anxious moments, wondering what had become of it. It was in the presence of a third person, unknown, on the scene that his greatest danger lay; for that reason—”

“By George!” cried Traynor, smacking fist into palm. “I have it! Levering! That was why he was so scared that night when he saw the supposed apparition. He knew it was no apparition. He only pretended to believe it was and posed as a spiritualist while all the time he was trying to find out—”

“And washing the stain of the indelible lead from the gold pencil off his fingers,” supplemented Kent, “and upsetting the purple ink in the writing desk up in his room as an alibi, eh? I admit that your guess is not without seeming foundation, Tommy. As I said before, Roger

Levering is mixed up in this somewhere and, judging by his attempt on my life—perhaps both attempts—it looks as if he was in this devil's brew up to his neck."

"Old man, you've done well with this thing," said Tommy with admiration. "How'n the mischief did you find it all out? Can you tell me how Levering—if he's the man—found out Mrs. Stanton had the cuff?"

"No, not yet. But it was Sunday night some time that he recovered it. The fact that the police had overlooked the steamer trunk in their first search and made their big find so promptly on Monday morning struck me as strange. When I questioned Hayes about it he said he had entrusted the search of the upper floor to McVey who was called off to other duties before he had quite finished the job and had given the steamer trunk very brief attention. A chance remark of Levering's before he left for the inquest—about how grateful his aunt was that her steamer trunk had been spared a clumsy mauling of its contents—had 'put a flea in his ear.'"

"Hm-hm—m! That fits in nicely," Traynor commented. "But how did you find out that Mrs. Stanton was the 'ghost'?"

"I called on Mrs. Stokes yesterday afternoon while I was out that way and had an interesting chat. I also picked up a packet of cardboard matches and learned that Mr. Bill Stokes had come home one night with a pocketful of them; each match carried the same advertisement on its flat shank and was otherwise identical with those I had found in Radcliffe's room and again on the stair of the secret passage where the daub of lum-

inous paint had been left. It established the missing link; for there seems little reason to doubt that Mrs. Stanton put one of these packets that were lying about the Stokes place in her pocket and used the cardboard matches to find her way in the dark. If any other proof is needed that our deductions are not at fault, we find it in the fact that immediately following the inquest and preceding the arrest of Mrs. Saint-Anton for the crime, the lady vanishes."

"Vanishes!"

"She is the only one who can give evidence in favor of the accused. Tommy, Mrs. Stanton has disappeared in a manner that indicates—compulsion."

Traynor stared at him in bewilderment and passed his hand through his hair in a gesture of helplessness.

"What are we up against?" he asked in a low voice. "What is it, Ad? What does it mean?"

"It means that the man—or gang—trying to fasten this crime by false evidence upon the woman now in custody will remove every obstacle that crosses their diabolical path as completely as they have removed Mrs. Stanton and as cunningly. They made Mrs. Stanton drop a postcard to Mrs. Stokes, advising her of a visit to friends and asking her to request Miss Radcliffe to excuse Mrs. Stanton for a few days; that was the last heard of her. She had an interview with Lamont, following the inquest, and started for home immediately afterwards. Lamont tells me she has no friends in the city to visit—"

"Lamont? How does he know?" asked Traynor in surprise.

"Your worthy boss, Tommy, knows much that he refuses to reveal. I tried my best to make him talk; but he closes up like a clam. He was very much afraid that someone would see me leaving his place last night; he seemed to expect what actually happened. Now, he has disappeared and you may well ask what is the meaning of it all. That is what we have to find out. What powerful influence is at work to make everyone who knows the truth shut their lips tight together and refuse to divulge the secret while they turn pale with fright? What horror lies beneath this murder of a respectable citizen like Henry Radcliffe? That is what we must find out."

Traynor got to his feet.

"The first thing we've got to do is to find Rose!" he cried as he paced the narrow confines of the room like a caged animal. His face was anxious and he clenched his fists. "By heaven! Kent," he said through clenched teeth, "if they've dared to lay a finger on her or harm a hair of her head—!"

"Easy, old man. I'm doing my best. I don't think she is in any danger; in her case it's probably ransom they're after—that is, if it is the same gang that is responsible for the other disappearances—Ouch! confound this arm!— You've got to pick up the trail and you mustn't head into it blindfolded."

"Right now I'm as blind as a bat! In heaven's name,

Ad, if you know anything, tell me! What have I got to do? Let me get busy on it!"

"It is the château!—an old feudal relic in France—which is throwing its black shadow down through the years to lie like a blot beneath this crime. What dire thing has happened there to end in the death of the master of Hillcrest I do not know. But Mrs. Stanton knows. Lamont knows. Roger Levering knows. Mrs. Saint-Anton knows. And we're going to find out in spite of bullets and hypodermic needles!"

Addison Kent's eyes were glittering with excitement. Pink spots burned in each cheek.

"Hand me the card you'll find inside the middle drawer of the desk, Tommy—the one with bits of paper pasted together upon it."

CHAPTER XXI

HIDDEN TRAILS

“**W**HY was Henry Radcliffe killed? That is the first question which comes to the surface in connection with this case,” resumed Addison Kent when he held in his hand the card for which he had asked. “The motive which leads a man to commit murder is usually more or less primitive, but it may be wrapped in mystery—as in the present instance. It is one of the first things the police look for as it quite frequently has a direct bearing upon the search for clues.

“You’ve heard it said, Tommy, that murder is committed for money, revenge or love; but these three subdivide into greed, ambition, inheritance, safety, jealousy, hate and so forth to the limit of the emotions. In casting about for a motive that would apply to the present crime we find absolutely nothing in Henry Radcliffe’s maturer years to point the way. His life has been most exemplary—that merely of a useful citizen who has attained prominence both in financial circles and in the broader field of service to his fellows, respected by all and greatly admired by those who knew him best. We are therefore forced to fall back upon the belief that he became a victim of some ‘enemy of wealth’—a ‘crank’—

or we must turn back many pages of the calendar to his earlier days to look for the enemy who has done this deed. Even in this direction I found nothing to give a definite clue.

"There was one event of Radcliffe's life, however, which attracts more than passing attention if only because he chose to be reticent about it—even to his own daughter. I refer to his marriage, Tommy. When you told me what Miss Radcliffe had said—about her father avoiding the topic every time she asked questions about her mother—I agreed with her opinion that it was somewhat strange, even when making due allowance for the fact that Henry Radcliffe's life had been darkened by the tragedy of his wife's death in the railroad wreck, as announced in the papers at the time—In the inside pocket of my coat there, old man—hand me the wallet, will you?

"I am indebted to the *Mercury* for this particular 'squib'," he said as he took out a clipping. "It is a fair example of the gossipy sort of filler with which the newspapers rounded out their recent reports of the arrest. Let me read it," and Traynor listened carefully to the account of the "lines of tragedy" with which Fate and the imaginative reporter had crossed the life of Henry Radcliffe. "There's no telling how much reliance can be placed in the accuracy of sensational 'copy', as you know very well; but in this particular case the writer went to the 'morgue' for his 'dope' and the paragraph sums up briefly what appeared in the newspapers at the time of Mrs. Radcliffe's death. It sent me to the files and I read up everything I could find.

"I will ask you to note that the honeymoon of Henry Radcliffe was spent in France on the estate of Professor William Winterby; on looking him up I found that he was a Fellow of the Royal Society and a very learned man in a scientific way, being greatly interested in archegony and also in archeology, particularly the relics of the Ugro-Finnic—"

"Hold on, I'm just human, Ad! Come again. What's this 'archegony'?"

"The doctrine of the origin of life." Kent smiled faintly. "Winterby and Radcliffe had made some research trips together and were close friends. Professor Winterby was something of a recluse and it was this tendency which no doubt led him to purchase an old château in France and retire there to live, accompanied by his wife; he remained on this estate until his death a few years ago. Apparently, then that part of the newspaper accounts can be taken as true—that Henry Radcliffe and his bride spent their honeymoon, or a part of it, with the Winterbys.

"But I am getting ahead of my clock. Before I looked up Professor Winterby I had established the fact that Armaund Lamont and Mrs. Stanton had something in common—that so far as he was concerned, in fact, the attachment was deeper than mere friendship."

"What! You mean Lamont is in love with her? Aw, come off, Ad!" laughed Traynor skeptically.

"It is true, nevertheless," said Kent seriously. "When he left us on Sunday night he went straight to a secret tryst with the lady—in the summerhouse at Hillcrest.

I happened to stumble on them there when I went out, looking for a quiet spot to think things over; I could not help hearing part of what was said. One remark of the woman's was so strange that I could not get it out of my head and it kept recurring because it seemed to me that it might carry some significance. She said: 'the black shadow of the château is creeping far beyond the old bridge' and she spoke of this shadow as a thing from which she had been trying to escape. She was very much afraid. Lamont kept assuring her that she was in no danger if she guarded her tongue. Apparently she had been confiding in him to some extent and I happened along at the end of the interview. She said it was too dangerous to tell him all in that place and she agreed to see him at his office the following day.

"What it was she had on her mind you can now guess; no doubt she told him that she had something in the Japanese box at the Stokes place and she was turning to him as the only friend she could trust to guide her. We are safe in concluding that it was the shirt-cuff about which she wished to consult him; for the thought in her mind was, remember, that someone was trying to make out that she was guilty of Radcliffe's death—Get me a drink of water, Tommy."

Kent lay back on the pillows for a few moments before he continued. Traynor watched him anxiously.

"I come now to another piece of luck," Kent resumed, holding out the cardboard. Traynor took it and studied the chess notation, pasted there, frowning without understanding. "I remembered that you said Levering

had received some chess instructions on the Saturday afternoon and with no other reason than curiosity I asked Thompson to see if he could find the thing among the waste paper; I had no great hopes that he would, but—there it is.

“You will recall how enthusiastic Levering pretended to be over the game of chess and how he tried to get each of us to play a game. I had no hankering for it at such a time and led him to believe I knew nothing of chess. One glance at that mixture there and I knew that Levering had been trying to discover whether it was safe for him to continue using his chess cipher.”

“Did you say ‘cipher’?”

“Yes. It’s a message, Tommy, and an important one to us. It gave me no trouble at all. In fact, it is so simple to anyone at all familiar with chess that it was evidently never intended to be put to any greater test than a passing glance.”

Simple! Scanning the thing, Traynor laughed a little and shook his head.

“He has used the text-book form of notation which places the moves of the white men above the line and the black below. It is hardly necessary to explain that a set of chessmen consists of sixteen ‘white’ and sixteen ‘black’ and that eight on each side are called ‘pieces’ and the remaining eight ‘pawns’. The pieces consist of the ‘King’, ‘Queen’, two ‘Bishops’, two ‘Knights’ and two ‘Rooks’. The checkered board on which they are played divides into ‘rows’ horizontally and ‘files’ longitudinally,

RICE GAMBIT

- | | | | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. <u>Q-R3</u>
<u>Kt-B7</u> | 2. <u>Kt-KB3</u>
<u>P-KKt4</u> | 3. <u>P-KR4</u>
<u>P-Kt5</u> | 4. <u>Kt-K5</u>
<u>Kt-KB3</u> |
| 5. <u>P x Kt</u>
<u>P-B6</u> | 6. <u>R x B(ch)</u>
<u>B-K3</u> | 7. <u>Kt-Kt sq</u>
<u>Kt-R6</u> | 8. <u>P-K4</u>
<u>P-K4</u> |
- Black has advantage

- | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. <u>K-Q3</u>
<u>K-Q2</u> | 2. <u>R-K sq</u>
<u>Q-K2</u> | 3. <u>Kt-Q2</u>
<u>Q x P</u> | 4. <u>Kt-Kt sq</u>
<u>Kt-R6</u> |
| 5. <u>R-K sq</u>
<u>Q-K2</u> | 6. <u>P x Kt</u>
<u>P-B6</u> | 7. <u>P-Q4</u>
<u>Kt-Kt5</u> | 8. <u>P-K4</u>
<u>P-K4</u> |
| 9. <u>Kt-Q2</u>
<u>Q x P</u> | 10. <u>B-Kt5</u>
<u>Q-Kt7 (ch)</u> | 11. <u>Q-R3</u>
<u>Kt-B7</u> | 12. <u>Kt-Kt sq</u>
<u>Kt-R6</u> |
| 13. <u>Kt-K5</u>
<u>Kt-KB3</u> | 14. <u>Kt-B3</u>
<u>Q-R3</u> | 15. <u>Q-R3</u>
<u>Kt-B7</u> | 16. <u>K-Q2</u>
<u>P-B8-Kt(ch)</u> |
| 17. <u>P-KR4</u>
<u>P-Kt5</u> | 18. <u>P-K4</u>
<u>P-K4</u> | 19. <u>Q-R4(ch)</u>
<u>P-B3</u> | 20. <u>P x P</u>
<u>B-Q3</u> |
| 21. <u>Kt-Kt sq</u>
<u>Kt-R6</u> | 22. <u>P x Kt</u>
<u>P-B6</u> | 23. Castles
<u>B x Kt</u> | 24. <u>P-K4</u>
<u>P-K4</u> |
| 25. <u>B-Kt3</u>
<u>Q-Kt7(ch)</u> | 26. <u>Q-R3</u>
<u>Kt-B7</u> | 27. <u>P-KR4</u>
<u>P-Kt5</u> | 28. <u>K-Q2</u>
<u>P-B8-Kt(ch)</u> |
- Black has better game

- | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. <u>P x B(ch)</u>
<u>K-B2</u> | 2. <u>R x B(ch)</u>
<u>B-K3</u> | 3. <u>Kt-K5</u>
<u>Kt-KB3</u> | 4. <u>Kt-KB3</u>
<u>P-KKt4</u> |
| 5. <u>B-Kt5</u>
<u>Q-Kt7(ch)</u> | 6. <u>Kt-B3</u>
<u>Q-R3</u> | 7. <u>2Kt</u>
Resigns | |

- | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. <u>K-Q3</u>
<u>K-Q2</u> | 2. <u>R-K sq</u>
<u>Q-K2</u> | 3. <u>Kt-Q2</u>
<u>Q x P</u> | 4. <u>P-KB4</u>
<u>P x P</u> |
| 5. <u>K-Q3</u>
<u>K-Q2</u> | 6. <u>B-Kt5</u>
<u>Q-Kt7(ch)</u> | 7. <u>Q-R4(ch)</u>
<u>P-B3</u> | 8. <u>K-Q3</u>
<u>K-Q2</u> |
| 9. <u>P-K4</u>
<u>P-K4</u> | 10. <u>R-K sq</u>
<u>Q-K2</u> | 11. <u>B-Kt5</u>
<u>Q-Kt7(ch)</u> | 12. Castles
<u>B x Kt</u> |
| 13. <u>P-Q4</u>
<u>Kt-Kt5</u> | 14. <u>Kt-Kt sq</u>
<u>Kt-R6</u> | 15. <u>P-K4</u>
<u>P-K4</u> | 16. <u>P x Kt</u>
<u>P-B6</u> |
| 17. <u>Kt-Kt sq</u>
<u>Kt-R6</u> | 18. <u>P-K4</u>
<u>P-K4</u> | 19. <u>Q-R4(ch)</u>
<u>P-B3</u> | 20. <u>P x P</u>
<u>B-Q3</u> |
- White mates in three moves

the rows designated by numbers and the files named after the piece which stands at the end of it when the game starts. It is thus possible to indicate any square on the board by setting down the initials of the piece to show the file and following these initials with the number of the row. A dash means 'moves to'; so, if we wished to indicate that the King's Knight was to be moved to the third square of the King's Bishop's file we would write it: KKt-KB³.

"While the casual appearance of Levering's message is that of a genuine chess notation and it is set down in imitation of actual play, it would deceive only those who did not understand chess. I saw at once that it was a code message. Notice that last of all comes: $\frac{11-EB}{8-97}$ which is different from the rest of it. I remembered you telling me that you had looked at the book which Levering left in the library at the time he interrupted you and Mr. Radcliffe and that it was Volume 6 of the 11th edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica; I had only to turn to page 97 to find what I wanted under 'Rice Gambit'.

"'Gambit' is a chess term to denote a certain kind of opening play and in the encyclopaedia's article on chess were given particulars of a game between Professor Isaac L. Rice, of New York, and Major Hanham. The key to the cipher was staring me in the face; for all that the sender of the message had done was to use the first twenty-six moves in the Rice Gambit notation in the encyclopaedia to denote the twenty-six letters of the alphabet. The numerals and the words written out—

'Black has advantage', etc.—were inserted to make it look like a chess notation to the uninitiated. The message resolved at once. You will see here how it worked out."

Traynor took the sheet of paper on which Kent had written down the result as follows:

1-o 2-c 3-d 4-e 5-s 6-p 7-r 8-a 9-t

1-w 2-i 3-l 4-r 5-i 6-s 7-k 8-a 9-l 10-t 11-o 12-r 13-e
14-m 15-o 16-v 17-d 18-a 19-n 20-g 21-r 22-s 23-h 24-a
25-t 26-o 27-d 28-v 29p

1-x 2-p 3-e 4-c 5-t 6-m 2Kt

1-w 2-i 3-l 4-b 5-w 6-a 7-t 8-n 9-w 10-i 11-t 12-h 13-k 14-r
15-a 16-s 17-r 18-a 19-n 20-g 21-d

oedesprat

oc desprat

wilriskaltoremovdangrshat-
odvp

wil risk al to remov dangr
shato dvp

xpectm2Kt

xpect m 2Kt

wilbwatnwithkrasrangd

wil b watn with kr as rangd

*O. C. desperate. Will risk all to remove danger of
château d.v.p. Expect him to-night. Will be waiting
with car as arranged.*

"As a concealed message you see how crude it was,"
said Kent. "The use of the initials of the Knight with

the figure 2 before it to represent 'tonight' is childlike in its simplicity. The only thing that puzzled me was the 'dvp' following the word 'château'. I was tremendously interested and it occurred to me that the letters might stand for the name of some château in France. I had just been reading up about Professor Winterby and remembered that the estate he had purchased was the Château des Hôtres. I went to the library and finally, found a description of this old castle of the beeches, discovering that close to it was another old relic of feudal times—the Château du Vieux Pont, which translates into the Château of The Old Bridge. The connection was established; for the strange remark of Mrs. Stanton to Lamont in the summerhouse on Sunday night was: 'the black shadow of the château is creeping far beyond the old bridge' and it was to visit Winterby in the neighborhood of the Château du Vieux Pont that Henry Radcliffe and his bride—"

"Good heavens!" breathed Traynor, staring, his lips parted.

"—went on their honeymoon. We are safe in taking it for granted that 'd.v.p.' stands for 'du Vieux Pont' and that 'O.C.' are the initials of the man who killed Henry Radcliffe!

"No, don't interrupt. Let me finish. The questions you would ask I have asked myself a dozen times and some of them remain unanswered. Who is 'O.C.'? Why was he desperate—so desperate that he was prepared to risk everything in order to remove the danger that threatened from this Château du Vieux Pont? What

danger? Danger to whom? What was Henry Radcliffe's connection with this danger? Was it he himself who was the menace? If so, what had happened to make him so? Apparently it was only in his death that safety for 'O.C.' lay. Where did Levering come in? Who sent him the message? Why was Mrs. Stanton likewise in danger from the château and what has so terrified Armaund Lamont that he has not slept for several nights? Why have they both been spirited away and where are they now? And finally, where is Miss Radcliffe?

"The message proves Levering's complicity beyond a doubt and makes three that we know of who were concerned in the crime—'O.C.', Levering and the third person who wrote the cipher message. It was a great mistake of the police to let Levering go; no doubt Fargey had him shadowed and thought he could lay hands on him at the hotel where Levering registered, but he underestimated his man. I am free to admit that the beggar's resourcefulness and daring are greater than I had thought possible and my own lack of caution has almost cost me my life."

"You are sure it was Levering who attacked you? How do you know that?" asked Traynor.

"By his eyes. It is the one thing to look for in penetrating disguise because it is the one thing that cannot be changed. That is why Roger Levering wore those glasses and took care that he was never without them—because his eyes were uncommon, a very light blue, small and of a particular coldness. They were the

cruelest, most dispassionately calculating eyes I ever looked into—eyes almost inhumanly soulless. I got a good look at them up in his room when I—accidentally—knocked off his glasses. I recognized those light blue eyes in the man who visited me at the hospital; there was no mistaking them. The man was Roger Levering.

“Having established Levering’s status as that of a criminal by intent at least, the question arises as to where his so-called aunt stands in relation to the Hillcrest murder. That she is involved in it seems altogether probable. What was there between her and Henry Radcliffe? What were they quarrelling about at 2 o’clock in the morning in his room? If she was a member of the gang, why was Levering—for it must have been he—so anxious to fasten the crime upon her that he took the risk of faking evidence against her? What had she done to arouse his displeasure—or failed to do? This is something which we cannot hope to answer at present.

“Similarly, we cannot yet find an answer to the identity of ‘O.C.’ or the motive which actuated him. Neither do we know what it was that happened at the Château du Vieux Pont to place Henry Radcliffe’s life in danger from these men. Also we are unable to say whether one of the three is Alceste or whether the theft of the jewels is a thing apart. However, the fact that the pearls which were missed when the safe was robbed first were gathered in so promptly the following night seems to point to the presence of the thief in the house still; I

am inclined to think it is not improbable that Levering is the very gentleman we are after."

"Alceste himself?"

"Yes. He seems to have all the qualifications. At best we can only guess at these things. The fact that the man who wrote the message was to be waiting with a car as arranged may indicate provision of a 'get-away' for 'O.C.' or for the transfer of the 'bundle' to a safe place.

"There remain to be accounted for the strange actions of Mrs. Stanton and Armaund Lamont. I have given very close thought to their connection with events and can reach a solution of it upon one hypothesis only. It is so strange as to be startling; but it would account for Mrs. Stanton's fear that the evidence of the shirt-cuff might be believed against her by the authorities; also for Lamont's refusal to reveal what he knows; and again, for the authorship of those typewritten messages received by Miss Radcliffe from some unknown well-wisher. If you look at that newspaper clipping again you will note that the body from the train wreck identified as that of Mrs. Radcliffe was—decapitated."

Traynor gave an ejaculation.

"You don't mean—?"

"Tommy, I believe that Henry Radcliffe's wife is still alive! Furthermore, I believe that Mrs. Stanton is the lady herself—Rose Radcliffe's mother!"

Speechless, Traynor stared at Addison Kent. In the silence of the moment the telephone in the adjoining room trilled loud and insistent summons.

CHAPTER XXII

CAPTURE

MUCH can happen in a short space of time. Much did happen in the three days that followed Addison Kent's removal from the hospital to his own apartment. Thompson's voice on the telephone had been dominated by urgency; but Tommy Traynor had needed no importunity of the butler's nor the excited commands of the novelist to send him speeding to Thompson's assistance when he was likewise flying to the rescue of Rose Radcliffe. Thompson had verified the fact that the young and beautiful heiress had been met at Woodland Cove by a powerful touring-car and whisked away into the labyrinth of automobile roads that veined the interior of Suffolk County, Long Island. With all the cunning of a born sleuth Thompson had secured an excellent description of the car and its occupants and had managed to trace it. Traynor joined him in the hunt; then on the fourth morning, just as they found the trail nearing an end, they had encountered not the missing girl alone but also Armaund Lamont and Mrs. Stanton, making for the nearest railroad point in a hired auto.

A strange story it was the missing trio had to tell—of an isolated place to which each had been taken separ-

ately, of bandages tied about their heads in order that they might not be able to take notice of landmarks as they approached, of comfortable quarters and good food and courteous treatment but nonetheless vigilant guard. Judging by its equipment, the place was some sort of private sanitarium. There each had found the other two; no effort had been made to keep them apart, once they were on the premises, but they had been denied any outside communication whatever. Then, quite unexpectedly, on the fourth morning they were ordered out into the same car in which they had arrived and with the side curtains buttoned tight and eyes once more bandaged they had been driven for several miles and abruptly set down in the middle of the road and left to their own resources after promises had been extracted from each that they would go straight home as fast as they could get there.

But much had happened in those few days—much! Mrs. Stanton had been approached as she left the office of Armaund Lamont by one who showed her the official shield of a plainclothes man; he stated that he had been sent from Headquarters to request her presence there immediately and he had hailed a taxi. But they had not gone to police headquarters; they had gone to the waterfront where they boarded a tug. She was told that no harm would befall her if she did exactly as she was instructed; she had no means of knowing where they went for she was kept in the tiny cabin out of sight and personally guarded by her captor. They landed somewhere on the north shore of Long Island and transferred

to the automobile. At the end of the journey she had been forced to write the postcard to Mrs. Stokes.

Rose had been met at the station by a man in the livery of the Struthers' chauffeur who said he had instructions to take her to Miss Struthers who was waiting at a summer hotel some miles away, having been taken suddenly ill. Her suspicions had not been aroused until they turned off the main road and had gone for some distance; then the driver had coolly informed her of the facts and put it up to her common sense to decide whether she would go peaceably and without harm or whether he would use force. He told her that he was taking her to the lady who had written her the messages signed "One Who Wishes You Well" and no harm was intended. He had ended by informing her, to her utter amazement, that the writer of the messages was her mother who was alive and well. Scarcely knowing what to believe, but having no choice in the matter anyway, she had decided to make the best of it. When the bandage with which she had been blindfolded upon nearing their destination had been removed she found herself in a large, airy room alone—with Mrs. Stanton. In the astonishment of that meeting, their joy at seeing each other kindled anew the strange bond of affection which many times they had sensed in one another. The hour that followed was an hour of confession and wonder—wonder, growing to belief, to pity, to tender emotion—an hour of infinite happiness.

Then had come the revelation of a purpose behind their forced "visit". In an interview alone with Mrs.

Stanton—or Mrs. Radcliffe, as she may be called—the suave, immaculate “Doctor” who seemed to be in charge of the establishment informed her that he expected Mr. Armaund Lamont to join their little “house party” shortly. In order that Mr. Lamont might accept the invitation in the right spirit he deemed it advisable for Mrs. Stanton to write a little letter which he would dictate. She had demurred at first until he calmly warned her that refusal to do as he said would endanger not herself alone but her daughter as well. At his dictation, therefore, she had penned an urgent note to Armaund Lamont, advising him that she was with Rose and that both of them were in danger. The letter implored him, if he still loved her and had any regard for his own safety, to do exactly as the bearer of the note directed and on no account to attempt communication with the police. If he placed himself completely in the hands of the bearer of the message, everything would come to a happy conclusion and not all the money in the world nor all the precious stones in the world could be as important as life and hope.

That had been the gist of it. In great apprehension she had signed it and heard the car depart. What did it mean? She was not long left in doubt; for the car returned just before daybreak, bringing the jeweler in a state of collapse—and the choicest gems from his vaults in a leather travelling bag! His captor had taken fiendish delight in playing upon his fears and had recounted horrible tales of murder as they rode the wooded highways in the dark, finishing the torture with the shocking

news of Addison Kent's death; with evident gusto his informant had described in detail the terrible throes which mark the end of those who die by the particular snake-poison with which in some mysterious manner Kent had been inoculated.

"They may take the jewels and escape, yes," whispered Lamont in breathless relation of his adventures to the two women, "but so terrible a thing as that they cannot—how is it in the slang?—cannot gallop off with it!"

Addison Kent, however, was very much alive when Tommy Traynor telephoned his great news that everybody was returning, safe and sound. The author's superb physique and three days of solid rest had worked recuperative wonders. He was out of bed, perforce with one sleeve empty; but the bandaged arm did not prevent him getting about. As arranged with Traynor over the 'phone, he motored out to Hillcrest in company with J. K. Yelland, of Fraser & Yelland, the young lawyer upon whom had devolved the formality of defending Mrs. Saint-Anton. Since her arrest his client had sunk into a despondency from which it had been impossible to arouse her; she seemed to have given up all hope, refused to talk and wished only to be left alone. Something in Kent's manner as they discussed the case en route, however, awakened the lawyer's flagging interest and when he learned that Mrs. Radcliffe was alive and had an important statement to make his surprise and eagerness left nothing to be desired.

It was a cheerful group who awaited them in the library at Hillcrest. None of the three principals were

experiencing any ill effects from their adventure and the revelation of Mrs. Stanton's identity was too wonderful for depression; its effect upon Rose was like the sudden burst of sunshine through a rift in sombre clouds and the others shared her joy. Even the loss of a fortune in precious gems, stolen in such a simple and audacious manner, could not dampen the spirits of Mr. Armaund Lamont who was once more his confident, well-groomed self with a jaunty rosebud in his coat lapel. *Pouf!* What were a few gems compared to the jewel of happiness at the end of a season of sorrow and anxiety? Less than nothing! Besides, those thieves had not escaped yet with their loot; for Thompson had asked permission to remain behind to follow up his clues and the police were hot on the trail. *Parbleu!* Assuredly.

As a preliminary to more intelligent action, Mrs. Radcliffe was eager to tell her story to Addison Kent and the lawyer. It was a trying ordeal for her, but she faced it bravely. And as that terrible tale of the black night which had ruined her life unfolded behind locked doors, the listening group fell silent. In her simple language as the scenes of that drama followed one by one like pictures upon a screen, the late afternoon shadows lengthened across the sward and crept like ghosts into the room; the dark oak panellings of the great library seemed to fade out while those who listened were transported on the wings of imagination to other surroundings in another year.

In the Convent of St. Ursula in the City of Montreal

in the great Canadian province, Quebec, had grown to beautiful young womanhood little Yvonne Prefontaine. She had known no other home; for she was an orphan, left to the guardianship of an aged parish priest who planned for her a life of consecration. But although reared behind the sheltering convent walls, there was that within her which yearned for the freedom of worldliness with the irrepressible spirits of youth. There were times when the call of the musical bells in the old stone belfry found no response in her heart and when the sylvan quiet and the feeding of doves and all the peaceful routine of her life palled upon her to an extent little dreamed by the good Sisters in whose care she dwelt.

She had just celebrated her eighteenth birthday when what promised to be the great event of her life occurred. Past the Convent of St. Ursula one day Fate trended the footsteps of the young, impetuous and handsome Harry Radcliffe, in Montreal on a business trip. The early harvest apples were ripening in the gnarly old orchard; it was against orders for Yvonne to climb, but that was what she had done and it was while perched on the convent wall, munching an apple from a limb that hung across it, that young Radcliffe caught sight of her roguish eyes and piquant beauty. Being nothing if not bold, he had essayed acquaintance and the two had sat there for some time, laughing and chatting about nothing at all. So elated by this charming adventure was

Yvonne that she promised to meet him there again the following day at the same hour.

It was but the first of many such meetings. For nearly two weeks Harry Radcliffe wooed her with all the fervor of complete captivation. To the young and impressionable girl his stories of his travels were like the pages of a wonderful book of adventure. He was about to leave on a trip to France and he urged her to marry him quietly and accompany him abroad. Swept off her feet by his ardor and by the glittering temptation of a trip across the ocean, the petite Yvonne agreed at last to go to him over the convent wall.

The appointed night arrived at last and without incident she stole from her room and down through the moon-mottled orchard. He was waiting, as promised, and they were married an hour later in the home of a Protestant clergyman. Their boat sailed that same night and not a trace of Yvonne Prefontaine was left behind except the tear-stained inadequate little note which she had addressed to the Mother Superior, saying she was going away of her own accord and leaving instructions as to the disposition of her pets—a kitten, a tame crow and a young rabbit.

It was a deliriously happy time, the three weeks that followed. His young bride's sweet face and charming grace had completely turned Henry Radcliffe's head. To the convent-bred girl everything she saw, every casual shipboard acquaintance, attracted her notice; in her unsophistication all people were kind and good. Her naiveté and great beauty in turn awakened interest

in those around her and it was not long before she learned that her headstrong and quick-tempered young husband was abnormally jealous by nature. He took to lecturing upon the wickedness of men and the devious ways of the world with such zeal that she rather resented the close watch he kept upon her at all times and once or twice she teased him with harmless flirtations just to see the masterly manner in which he asserted his prerogative and sent her admirers flying and took her to task; for she had grown to love him dearly and she liked to tease him for the joy of "making it all up" afterwards.

Once away from the restricted limits of shipboard, however, she dropped these tactics and settled down to enjoy to the fullest the wonderful honeymoon jaunts which he planned. They visited many beautiful spots in that beautiful old country of France and they wound up at last with a visit to Radcliffe's old friend, Professor William Winterby, who with his wife and a few old servants lived in the ancient Château des Hêtres in the midst of wildwood solitude. The Winterbys were very much surprised to learn of the marriage and, Yvonne fancied, were inclined at first to look at her askance; when they were alone Mrs. Winterby asked her many questions about her parents which she was unable to answer. But they were hospitable enough and it was a happy visit.

A happy visit! Without warning came that night of terror, blotting all the light from her life as black

thunderclouds blot out the sun—as the ruthless lightning rives the innocent tree in its path.

Yvonne had been warned by her husband to keep away from the other old château which was in the neighborhood. He gave no reason for this mandate except that she might get lost if she wandered off the Winterby estate. He did not tell her that the Château du Vieux Pont had been leased by the Countess Marinelli, a woman who was notorious in every capital of Europe and noted for many things of doubtful savor. She only knew that many guests had come flocking down from Paris for a house party at the neighboring château and that there was much laughter and gayety; but she had no intention of seeking to join them in their frivolities.

As she wandered alone in the woodland park behind the Château des Hêtres, picking flowers one morning, she was quite startled, therefore, to come suddenly face to face with a smiling young man of handsome carriage and fascinating manners. He gazed at the beautiful vision of her in bold delight. She did not know that the “gentlemen” in the train of the Countess Marinelli were roués, underworld characters and political spies; but her intuition warned her not to linger in conversation with this stranger, who only laughed when she hastened away.

That night the week of roystering at the Château du Vieux Pont was to be capped by a grand *bal au masque*. In the afternoon Henry Radcliffe had taken the dog-cart and gone away on a leisurely message of some sort for Professor Winterby that took him far along the high-

road to Epinay. As he had not returned by dusk, but was expected momentarily, Yvonne ventured to stroll a little way down the road in order to ride back with him. It was a little lark of her own conception—to surprise him like this—and she said nothing of her intention to Mrs. Winterby or the *concierger* at the gate.

She did not go far—only around the turn in the road at the end of the estate. She was on the point of retracing her steps when to her surprise she saw hurrying towards her the tall, handsome young gentleman whom she had encountered accidentally in the wood that very morning. She half turned to run, but he held up his hand in an urgent gesture; she saw then that he was panting for breath as if he had been running and he seemed to be too excited to speak as he stood for a moment, mopping his forehead with a silk kerchief.

Then hurriedly he informed her that there had been an accident—yes, her husband!—and he had volunteered to run on and give the alarm at the Château des Hêtres. He told her that Mr. Radcliffe had been pretty badly hurt in a runaway and was calling for her; they had carried him into the inn at the crossroads. Without giving her time to think, he hurried her along the road in the direction of the inn and she, forgetting everything in the wild anxiety of the moment, went with him. Ah, if only she had insisted upon running back to the château gate to notify the *concierger* before going to her husband's aid!

Nearly opposite the neighboring château two men suddenly appeared from a path that came out of the woods

to the road. All three set upon her so unexpectedly that she had no time to cry out before a heavy cloak was thrown over her head. Her screams thus muffled, she was carried off she knew not where; for in her mad struggles and hysteria she fainted.

When at last she came to her senses she found herself alone in a bare-walled room of the Château du Vieux Pont—a tower room with no window or opening of any kind—in a deserted wing of the massive feudal castle.

She ran to the heavy oaken door and found it locked. She pounded upon it with little futile fists until they were bruised. She called for help at the topmost pitch of her voice. But her cries were utterly swallowed by the great thickness of the stone walls.

CHAPTER XXIII

La Nuit Noire

THE hours crept by. She would have been in the dark but for a lone taper in a niche of the wall. She knew she would be missed and a search for her started, but recalled with dismay that none had seen her leave the Château des Hêtres and there was no way of tracing her. She pictured her husband's return; he would be frantic with alarm and would insist upon arousing the entire household to an all-night search. He would come here to the Château du Vieux Pont and they would tell him that they had not seen her. The hopelessness of her position grew more and more manifest.

Calling for help until she was exhausted, Yvonne huddled down at last in a sobbing, forlorn little heap. Then from some hidden source within her was born a certain desperate courage and cunning. She would fight! She would use a woman's weapons and perhaps the way would open. As time dragged and none came near her the hope that she would escape brought her strange calm. She knelt in prayer for guidance.

It was almost midnight when a key grated in the lock and her captor entered with a queer ancient-looking

lantern in which a candle burned. It evidently went with his costume; his pink mask was shoved up on his forehead and he grinned cheerfully as he set the lantern on the floor and turned to relock the door.

Like a flash she darted across the room and snatched the key from his grasp. He put his back against the door, ogling her, assuring her with exaggerated politeness that he appreciated her spirit. It added zest to beauty, did it not?

Still smirking at her, he advanced until she had retreated to the farther wall. Then as she tried to dodge past him for the door he caught her by the wrist with strong fingers and drew her toward him slowly and irresistably by sheer strength until he pulled her other arm within reach. He twisted her arms until she cried out and the key fell from her nerveless fingers. He picked it up, locked the door and put the key in his pocket, still smilingly unruffled.

She knew then that it was useless to match her strength against his and she suddenly began to laugh. She made a gesture of helplessness and scolded him for twisting her arms. He apologized most humbly and welcomed her change of attitude eagerly. She pleaded with him to let her go but he shook his head. He had been drinking, but not enough to lose his cunning. She tried wheedling him into unlocking the door without success. Then she learned that the big masked ball was in full swing down below and that the crowd were having a high old time in the banqueting hall.

"Oh," she cried, clapping her hands, "take me down

and show me, won't you please? I have never seen a big party like that and I think you are very selfish if you keep me out of all the fun. Besides, I have had nothing to eat and I am very hungry, and—and nothing to drink," she added in desperation.

Anything were better than her present situation. There was at least a chance of escape there; here there was none.

"Will you dance for the ladies and gentlemen if I take you down there?" he asked at last.

She promised that she would. She saw that he hesitated, saw him waver, and she urged along the idea eagerly. It seemed to appeal to him; for he suddenly slapped his leg and chuckled as he glanced down at his costume, improvised to go with the ancient lantern and pass for that of an old-time linksboy.

"But you have no costume and you cannot dance properly, dressed like that. Dancing girls don't need clothes," he laughed gleefully.

She tried to avoid him, but he grabbed at her gown and ripped it from her shoulders. She cried out in anger and slapped his flushed face, even bit and scratched as he began to disrobe her, laughing boisterously at the joke of it. Frantically she told him that she would not dance at all if he did not let her dance as she wished. If what she had read were true, most dancers did their own disrobing—as they danced—did they not?

It was an inspired argument. He desisted at once. With a chuckle he felt for the key and unlocked the door. Together they descended the winding stair, he gripping

her arm painfully to make sure of his prize. Together they passed through echoing corridors, musty with age and decay, until at last they came within sight of the great central stone staircase and within sound of revelry from the banquetting hall.

She shrank back, struggling madly to escape, but he forced her over the flagstones, through a small anteroom and the whole roystering midnight carousal burst upon her horrified gaze. She had pleaded with him for a mask to wear and he laughingly had ripped the flounce from her petticoat and poked two holes through it for her eyes and bound it around her head. On the stroke of midnight all masks would have to come off; it was the rule of the night, he said.

Above the din of their noisy welcome from that inebriated company she heard as from a distance her captor's loud voice, announcing that Mademoiselle Wildcat, caught alive in the forest, would dance for them—and take off the rest of her clothes herself! Drunken shouts and laughter greeted this unexpected novelty on the program. The Countess was celebrated for her delightful surprises, *n'est-ce pas? Vive la Comptess!*

A space was quickly cleared in the centre of the long table and, frightened and trembling, the mortified little girl from the Convent of St. Ursula was forced forward and lifted upon it. Her terrified glances had not been idle for a moment; but in none of the faces which she scanned could she find a single look of sympathy to which she could appeal. Through the holes in the array of masks looked only eyes which were evil or which were dulled by wine.

So she danced to please them, to gain time, while in agony of soul she tried to figure out some way of escape from her awful predicament. She danced on, planning, locating the doors and windows, weighing her chances of success by a sudden leap from the table for liberty and honor. Someone had twined a vine from the table decorations about her. So she danced, in what clothes were left to her, her white shoulders gleaming in the light from hundreds of candles, her bare knees flashing.

Suddenly she paused in dismay as a gong sounded the midnight hour. With one accord hands went to the masks. Panic-stricken, she stood, she alone remaining covered. A howl of protest arose. The nearest cavalier leaped to the table beside her and tore away her impromptu mask; he fell back with a gasp at the beauty of her.

Just then came a great commotion at the door and bursting in upon that ribald scene like one demented Yvonne saw—Henry Radcliffe, followed by the staid Professor William Winterby. For one long moment husband and wife stared at each other in disbelief. Then with a great cry of joy and relief Yvonne leapt off the table and ran towards him, sobbing hysterically.

But with an oath he flung her from him to the floor. His face was black with passion. He hid his eyes on his arm, turned on his heel, fled out into the night with an exclamation of horror.

“Harry! Harry!”

There was but a moment to act in the confusion of the interruption and she seized it, running from the room at

top speed to overtake Henry Radcliffe. But he had dashed out of the château with the dumfounded Winterby after him and even as she ran down the corridor she heard the massive outer door slam with ironbound finality.

She could not open it! The sound of pursuit was close at hand. She darted for the huge stone staircase that descended into the hallway and had just time to creep out of sight, trembling and heartsick, into a dark corner beneath it. Here she cowered while running feet passed her on all sides. Laughter and shouts arose in the *mélee* of the pursuit about the grounds.

Slowly the company straggled back to the feasting. Long after comparative silence had fallen upon the passageway little Yvonne Prefontaine still crouched in her retreat, afraid to venture forth. Then, just as she was about to pluck up courage to try for the outer door again or seek some other exit, she heard angry voices approaching and above them the protesting accents of a woman.

"Gentlemen, please! If it is that you must fight, why not with your fists—like the *canaille*, *n'est-ce pas?* Or with your fencing foils—like vagabond players? Truly, it is but pretence, my brave gentlemen, *n'est-ce pas?* Surely you do not intend to fight over me as fought the cavaliers over their ladies—perhaps in these very halls! *Voilà!* the swords! *Mon dieu!* they mean it!" gasped the woman; but there was a note of exultation in the tone that belied the hollow words she had spoken.

The frightened little girl from the far-off Province of Quebec shrank in fresh terror at the low tense passion

in the masculine voices, their muttered satisfaction, the rush of the men's feet as they ran to snatch from the wall the glittering rapiers crossed there—rapiers to which the woman so artfully had directed their attention. Ancient arms hung upon those walls—broadwords and battle-axes of bye-gone days, steel armour, helmets and bucklers, rusty with age and neglect; but there was no rust upon the two rapiers, the blades of which glittered wickedly in the candlelight of the candelabrum which the woman held high above her head. It was as if they had been placed there for this very occasion.

Curiosity got the better of Yvonne. She peered out upon the strange scene from her hiding-place with bated breath. One of the gentlemen was dressed in an early sixteenth-century costume with flaring-topped leather boots and large spurs, a wide hat with a red plume and a great wig of black curls which fell to his shoulders to match the swaggering false moustache upon his lip, just below his black mask. The other was in a red brocaded coat, knickerbockers and white silk stockings of the seventeenth mid-century fashion with powdered periwig tied behind with a ribbon.

It was like a play to see them cross rapiers. There was a viciousness in the hiss of the steel blades, however, and a grim earnestness in the thrust and parry that bespoke deadly determination; those sharp, shining blades in the hands of these practised swordsmen—for each apparently was familiar with the weapon—held infinite possibilities of tragedy.

The Countess Marinelli—for it was she—stood on the stone steps of the descending stair, one white bejewelled hand gripping the stone balustrade, the other holding high the candlestick from which came uncertain, flickering light that cast gaunt, elongated shadows on the walls.

The younger of the two men, he of the powdered periwig, was fighting with wonderful aggression. He pressed his opponent without permitting a breathing space. Even the inexperienced Yvonne saw that the cavalier was tiring. He retreated slowly to the bottom step of the stairway, beating off the flashing menace of the other's blade with remarkable skill but giving ground steadily.

The end came swiftly. Yvonne saw the Countess Marinelli with catlike tread step noiselessly down behind the man who was so hard pressed. At a critical moment in the lightning play of the rapiers the frightened watcher saw the woman give a sudden push against the broad back. Thrown off his balance, the cavalier fell forward just as the thrusting blade of his adversary came on the lunge. The sharp point of it came through the man's back. He toppled in a heap.

"Mon dieu! What have you done? Ah, mon dieu!" moaned the Countess.

In the fall of the body the wig of black curls had come away, revealing the gray hair beneath. The younger man, completely sobered by what had happened, bent down and removed the mask that hid the features of the dead man. With a strange choking cry he leaped

back, the whites of his eyes showing in the surprise and agitation of that moment of recognition. He threw the rapier from him in abhorrence; it clattered and slid on the flat paving-stones. He leaned weakly against the staircase, his head buried for a moment in an agony of remorse.

Then he straightened abruptly. His face looked terrible in the candlelight as he stepped towards the Countess Marinelli who watched him, fascinated by his pointing finger.

"What have *you* done, you evil one?" he cried hoarsely. "Why did you not tell me it was my father with whom I was quarrelling—my own father?" His face grew dark with rage and at that she smiled at him, calculating him with cold assurance.

"And what does Monsieur O'Carrol intend to do now?" she demanded. "The Law does not recognize affairs of honor like this, monsieur. The Law to-day calls it murder. Two gentlemen quarrel over a lady's favor; they insult one another and fight; one dies and the Law calls it murder and seeks a life for a life. What are you going to do, I ask you? Perhaps the matter may be hushed up—if the young Monsieur Dermot O'Carroll will do as I say. Yes? Monsieur knows how to be discreet, does he not?"

But the young man recoiled from the woman as from a loathsome thing and with an inarticulate cry—fled—fled to the sound of the Countess Marinelli's low, mocking laugh in the empty corridor behind him,

So badly frightened by what she had witnessed that she felt faint, little Yvonne Prefontaine at length was able to venture out from her hiding-place and make her way down a side passage at the end of which she found a small door. To her immense relief it opened on a courtyard with a great gate through which she sped like a shadow—out, out and away into the perfumed air of God's peaceful summer night.

From that towering bulk of the Château du Vieux Pont she ran as from a place accursed.

CHAPTER XXIV

A BLANK WALL

STRAIGHT for the Château des Hêtres she flew and it was only at the very gates of the Winterby estate that she realized her appearance. She could not go in to them that way. She must first awaken the wife of the aged *concierge* and get the good woman to lend her a cloak. With this about her she hurried on, pressed hastily past the servant who opened the door and came upon the group by the fire-place; for the events of the night had upset the routine of the household completely and they were not yet abed.

At sight of her standing there in the doorway Henry Radcliffe sprang from his chair, a black frown upon his face, pallid and worn with the mental suffering through which he was passing. He pointed imperiously to the staircase and told her in a voice which was cold and even and determined to go to her room and pack her belongings; in the morning she would be driven to the train.

He refused to listen to her pleadings at first; but at last she fell on her knees before him and with tears rolling down her cheeks she swore that she could explain everything if he would only listen. So he laughed

skeptically—ah, such a laugh!—and listened. Panic grew upon her as she realized how unsatisfactory that story sounded in the bald telling and that the faces of her audience remained unmoved. They did not believe her!

Her husband told her so bluntly at last. All his jealous nature had arisen to a cold fury that crowded out his reason; his better instincts and his judgment were alike smothered in rage and bitter humiliation. She had been seen by one of the servants, talking to a stranger from that nest of iniquity—the Château du Vieux Pont—talking to him that very morning! She could not make him believe that the whole thing had not been arranged in order that she might have her gay fling—not if she knelt there for a hundred years! If what she said were true, why had she not at once notified the *concierge* of the alleged accident? She was but a little way from the gate, according to her story; yet she went off with this “total stranger” of hers as if she had known him all her life! Bah! He was through with her and never wanted to see her again. She could take the return ticket to where she came from. In the morning she must leave that roof whose hospitality she had insulted.

Heart-brokenly she turned to the Winterbys; but they stood like ice before her entreaties. To people who were snobs at heart and had secretly resented Radcliffe’s choice, the evidence of her guilt appeared too damning. “Blood will tell,” they had whispered not half an hour

ago. "Blood will tell," Henry Radcliffe echoed from the depths to which his injured pride had sunk.

Then to little Yvonne Prefontaine who had never known her parents came a dignity of her own. She ceased her abasement before them and gazed at them with pity. Her voice did not falter as she bade her husband goodbye; something seemed to have snapped within her. She refused to accept the boat passage back to Quebec. The early morning train carried her to Paris.

She had a vague idea of seeking work to earn her passage-money home, knowing that it would take months. She was a little stranger in a strange land and but for the fact that the good God had raised a friend in her extremity there was no telling what might have become of her. Attracted by the pathos and beauty of her face as she stood hesitating in the railway depot, a young man approached and after much hesitation ventured to ask if there was any service he could perform for her. With his help she found her way to a temporary refuge in a respectable boarding-house and finally secured employment in a millinery shop.

The young man who had thus befriended her was named Armaund Lamont, connected at that time with a Paris jewelry establishment. The acquaintance between them ripened and when he had learned part of her story he took her home one day to visit his aged mother. To her sympathetic ears the heartbroken young woman confided her whole story.

When the time approached that her baby was to be born Mrs. Lamont found shelter for her with the Gray

Nuns and from there she obtained employment as a governess. She heard nothing from Henry Radcliffe until the little baby girl was two years old; he had not acknowledged her letter, advising of the little one's birth, but one day a notary called upon her and advised her that her husband desired the child to be with him. Knowing that it meant education and greater advantages than she could hope to provide, Yvonne let the child go. The unfortunate woman found it hard to give up her baby; but she steeled herself to start life anew and try to forget.

She accepted a position as governess in an English family and several years passed by. In time she returned to Quebec and found a similar position there. Once a year she made a secret pilgrimage to New York to get sight of her little girl, unknown to Henry Radcliffe whose heart had remained adamant towards the woman who had ruined his faith in women. On her part Yvonne made no effort to force herself upon him; for she was quite able by this time to take care of herself. Her one concern was his treatment of Rose and in this direction there was no fault to find; for Henry Radcliffe lavished love and care upon his daughter if ever a man did.

It happened that upon one of her secret pilgrimages she was in a railroad disaster and although uninjured, she lost all her personal travelling possessions in the wreck of the car, including the gold locket which her husband had given her at the time of their wedding. To her astonishment she found her name listed among the victims of the train wreck, the locket and her handbag

being found beside the decapitated body of a young woman. Instead of trying to correct the mistake, she allowed the news to reach Henry Radcliffe and let things take their course, believing that it was better for him to think of her as dead if he could not forgive and believe in her innocence.

The years of suffering had wrought a great change in the once beautiful Yvonne, so much so that in time she could come and go more freely; for none who had known her as a girl-bride would now recognize her in this white-haired woman with the sallow face. She took up permanent residence in New York at last and watched her little girl growing to budding womanhood. Her hunger to be near Rose overpowered all fear of discovery finally and she became the seamstress of the family, assuming the name of Catharine Stanton and going to live near Hillcrest with the Stokes family.

When Mrs. Saint-Anton first put in an appearance at Hillcrest Yvonne recognized her instantly as the notorious Countess Marinelli, much changed by the years but still recognizable to one upon whose memory those haughty features had been so indelibly imprinted that night when she had stood on the stone staircase, unmasked, in the Château du Vieux Pont. It seemed like a strange trick of Fate that this wicked woman should once more cross her path. Yvonne made it her business to find out why "Mrs. Saint-Anton" was at Hillcrest and was not long in discovering that the woman was blackmailing Henry Radcliffe by threatening to reveal to Rose

the disgrace which the girl's mother had brought upon the Radcliffe name at the Château du Vieux Pont.

How this woman had learned that Henry Radcliffe had kept these facts from his daughter sedulously and that it was the one weak spot in which to attack him Yvonne could not fathom. It was true that it was a positive obsession with him to guard against Rose learning this secret; some day he would be forced to tell her—when she came of age—but he dreaded that day's arrival as if he were afraid of his daughter's condemnation. The latter years had softened Henry Radcliffe not a little; there were times when he no doubt wondered if he had been too hasty—if his forlorn little bride perhaps had been innocent, as she had claimed. That doubt was the cross which was with him always and there were moments of poignant remorse that were very bitter. He sought penance by worshipping Rose and gratifying her every whim.

Yvonne, although she avoided the master of the house as much as possible, was not ignorant of these things. Her intuition told her of the change that was taking place in Henry Radcliffe's attitude. She occupied her thoughts with plans for sending this blackmailer about her business. The scene she had witnessed that night in the drafty corridor of the old château recurred to her. She had recounted all the details to the Lamonts at the time and Armaund had gone to the police with the story. However, the party at the Château du Vieux Pont had broken up immediately following the masked dance; the place was untenanted and the Countess Marinelli had

disappeared none knew where. Her aliases were many in the capitals of Europe. Certainly she had left France on some dark mission of her own; so that she had never been brought to book for this particular misdeed.

It seemed to Yvonne that here was a weapon with which her husband could silence this woman definitely and for all time; but how to convey the information to Henry Radcliffe was the problem. The fact that recently he had started serious study of spiritism gave her the fantastic idea. She knew that he was reading many volumes upon psychic phenomena and Yvonne hit upon the extravagant plan of appearing to her husband in the guise of her own spirit and holding converse with him. She knew that the books he had been reading had more than half convinced him it was possible for visions of persons deceased to appear to the living at times of crisis and she decided to risk such an interview.

She planned to appear in his room by way of the secret passage, the existence of which he was likely to have forgotten as it had never been used. A mistake of the architect in planning the alterations or of the workmen in carrying out instructions had been responsible for the surplus space during Henry Radcliffe's absence; upon his return he had ordered the workmen to proceed and bury the section of the old staircase in the new walls, the conversion of it into a secret exit from his own room being a later whim. Only Henry Radcliffe and the workmen were supposed to know of it at all; Yvonne had discovered it by accident during the summer she acted as temporary stewardess at Hillcrest. It

therefore enabled her to appear and vanish with the necessary mystery when she undertook to materialize as a spirit and by keeping well within the alcove, where the light was uncertain, she managed the deception successfully.

She appeared to her husband in this guise on one occasion only—the night Rose had so nearly surprised them in their seance. Yvonne told him that “Mrs. Saint-Anton” was really the woman known as the Countess Marinelli. She told him that she, his wife, knew the difficulty he was in and that for Rose’s sake he must get rid of Mrs. Saint-Anton. To this end he was to ask her about the sword combat at the *Château du Vieux Pont* on the night of the *bal au masque* and the manner in which the elder O’Carroll had been sent to his death; he was to threaten the woman with exposure if she did not stay away from Hillcrest and leave them alone. He had promised that he would carry out these instructions and she had left him hurriedly; for her own emotions at his pleadings for forgiveness threatened to overcome her and reveal the hoax that she was perpetrating.

Mrs. Saint-Anton had been coming there whenever she happened to run short of money and Henry Radcliffe was expecting her next visit about the end of the month. To prepare the way for the showdown, Yvonne was anxious to get Rose out of the way; if necessary, she intended to reveal her own identity, explain to her husband the fact that her announced death was a mistake and as the eyewitness in the case, denounce the Countess Marinelli to her face.

She therefore wrote the three mysterious notes to her daughter, not realizing how foolish it was until afterward when they failed of their purpose; she had thought that her husband would see that Rose did go visiting and she regretted not having warned him to do so instead of merely succeeding in arousing the girl's curiosity and alarm. It had been a silly, inadequate performance in keeping with that other foolish notion of playing at ghost. It would have been much better if she had revealed to her husband her true identity in the first place; but it is not always easy to be wise in a difficult situation even when one has wide experience at command.

She saw that Henry Radcliffe was very anxious and worried. Here again, frankness with Rose would have been best; for one's fears so often were groundless and it was time Rose should know the truth. In his nervous uncertainty her husband was praying nightly for the spirit of his wife to advise him once more. His belief in the vision he had had was firm and there would be little difficulty in convincing him if she tried it a second time. Mrs. Saint-Anton and Roger Levering, however, were on hand now and with them on the premises the risks were tripled. Nevertheless, she decided to take the chance and advise her husband to lay all the facts before Rose and let the girl order the intruders out of the house.

But it was too late. The night Yvonne chose was the night of the tragedy and she narrowly escaped capture in her masquerade. It had been a simple matter for her to acquire a duplicate key to the servants' entry and,

knowing the habits of the establishment so thoroughly, to time her approach correctly. She had made herself a diaphanous costume which with the assistance of luminous paint enabled her to obtain the effect of a ghostly, indeterminate shape in the dark; she assumed these habiliments in the sewing-room on the third floor. After her horrible discovery of Henry Radcliffe's body she had recoiled with a cry of horror and started to retreat from the room by way of the wardrobe panel, but as she was about to release the hidden spring the shock of the gruesome find suddenly reacted in a wave of weakness that almost made her swoon. She was forced to wait a few moments before she could proceed.

It was then that she heard someone enter the room from the door that led out into the hall and she shrank within the wardrobe and held her breath in great fear. Whoever it was evidently knew what he was about, for he lost no time in approaching the body on the floor. Yvonne heard a slight click and peered cautiously forth through the crack of the wardrobe door to see a man's hand, busy writing upon a cuff of the murdered man's shirt with a gold pencil—just a pair of hands, illuminated in the rays from an electric flashlight which lay upon the floor alongside. As methodically and swiftly as he had come the intruder departed; the whole thing took only a moment and Yvonne wondered for an instant whether she was the victim of false perception.

There was nothing intangible about the message on that cuff, however. The only light she had with her was a packet of cardboard matches. When she struck one of

these flares and read the writing her heart sank at what appeared to her to be an accusation directed against herself. Why was this false evidence being deliberately manufactured against her? Thinking the name was "Stanton", she stooped quickly, ripped off the cuff and fled as she heard someone stirring in the next room. Up the hidden stair to the trunk room, thence to the sewing-room she went, half crazed.

She hardly knew what she was doing. Her one idea was to get out of that house as quickly as possible; but for a while she felt too weak and upset to move. What if she were seen escaping? She decided to keep on her masquerade till she was safe outside in the shrubbery. At last she summoned her courage and descended the staircase. She sensed that she was being followed and fear speeded her feet once she was out in the grounds. Sounds of a struggle in the shrubbery behind her sent her flying for the garden gate, divesting herself of the flowing draperies as she ran. Once on the highway, she sped for the woodland path by which she was accustomed to take a short-cut through the park. She was confident that nobody could have recognized her; but to make certain that she was not followed she hid beside the path, watching and listening for half an hour. As nobody came that way she went home at last with relief and let herself quietly into her own room.

Her state of mental uncertainty was terrible. It was not until she calmed down that she began to wonder if the accusation on the cuff was directed at Mrs. Saint-Anton. Someone knew that the woman had killed Henry

Radcliffe and had taken this means of directing the police? Mrs. Saint-Anton had shot to silence Henry Radcliffe when he revealed his knowledge of the O'Carroll affair at the Château du Vieux Pont! That was the motive, then, and the grief of Yvonne that this should be the result of her advice to her husband was bitter. She was sorry now that she had removed the cuff.

But she could not take it back. She dare not reveal her presence on the scene. It would come out that she was Mrs. Radcliffe and all manner of false impressions would result. She did not know what was best to do and in all New York was only one in whom she could place implicit trust and to whom she could turn in her extremity. That one was Armaund Lamont and he even did not know that she was alive. She had avoided him all these years because after time had softened the acuteness of her misery in France he had never ceased to urge her to secure a divorce and marry him. He had wooed her with such persistence that she had left France altogether. Marriage, she felt, was a failure in her case and she would not wed where she could not give heart as well as hand.

It had been a bitter disappointment for Armaund Lamont, who loved her sincerely. This friend and benefactor had remained a bachelor as a result of it. He had gone to America and had risen in the world. That she had only to reveal herself to him to command his utmost help, Yvonne knew.

His arrival at Hillcrest on Sunday gave her the opportunity which she could not resist and she had met

him in the arbor that night. Someone must have spied upon them there and overheard her confess her identity and tell Armaund of the shirt-cuff which she had concealed in her Japanese jewel-box at the Stokes bungalow; for that night it was stolen. Her abduction occurred the very next day after she had reported the matter to Armaund Lamont.

What the meaning of the terrible things that had happened could be, Yvonne did not know. She learned of Mrs. Saint-Anton's arrest only when Rose told her. Even if the woman were guilty of the crime with which she was charged, Yvonne felt it her duty to relate all these facts; for undoubtedly the evidence of the shirt-cuff was forged. She was anxious to assist the police in every way and was prepared to give her testimony in court.

The twilight had deepened in the Hillcrest library until the final sentences of the narrative were spoken in semi-darkness. The silent figures of Mrs. Radcliffe's audience surrounded her dimly. For a long time after the gentle voice ceased a silence reigned in the room—a silence broken at last by long breaths, eloquent of tension.

Tommy Traynor rose and pressed the button that flooded the library with light. Mrs. Radcliffe lay back in the club chair she occupied, resting, her eyes closed; it had not been easy for her to lay bare these intimate details of her life and the recital had stirred anew the wellsprings of her suffering. From beneath her closed lids the tears coursed down her cheeks. Her daughter stood beside the chair, one arm along the back of it, the

other stroking the white hair while she regarded this newfound mother of hers with eyes which shone mistily. Armaund Lamont had blown his nose violently and stepped to the window, gazing out as if he really could see the landscape.

Addison Kent got up quietly and went across to where J. K. Yelland was sitting. He held out his hand.

"My congratulations, Yelland," he said in a low voice. "While it is true that Mrs. Radcliffe's testimony will provide the prosecution with a perfectly strong motive, it will likewise destroy the strongest evidence against your client—completely. Taken in conjunction with certain discoveries which I have made, it should result in prompt acquittal beyond a doubt."

Before the smiling lawyer could make reply, there came a light knock on the door and the voice of Follis, announcing that Mr. Yelland was wanted urgently upon the telephone by Mr. Fraser, his partner. He excused himself and went out into the hall.

"May I ask you, Mrs. Radcliffe," said Kent gently, "if you recognized in Roger Levering anyone you had ever known?"

"He was a complete stranger to me, Mr. Kent," she replied.

"Did you recognize anything familiar in the appearance of the men who were responsible for your enforced visit on Long Island?"

"No. They were total strangers also."

"This man O'Carroll who killed his father in the duel at the Château, then—Did you ever hear anything more

of him—what became of him, where he went and so on?”

Traynor leaned forward in his chair as Kent asked this question, his expression suddenly eager. O’Carroll—O’C! He waited breathlessly for the answer.

“No,” was the reply. She shook her head. “That is something which I have often wondered. I have never heard of him from that day to this.”

“But you are quite sure the name was O’Carroll?”

“Oh, I am quite sure of that, Mr. Kent. I have an excellent memory for names and the whole thing was so impressed upon me at the time—”

She paused with a start. Everyone in the room turned suddenly towards the door as the agitated voice of J. K. Yelland at the telephone rose loud in ejaculation.

“WHAT? Oh, Fraser, surely—My God!”

They all watched him as he entered the room slowly, his face blank with astonishment.

“What’s wrong, Yelland?”

The lawyer eyed them in silence for a moment. All animation seemed to have gone from him.

“Our evidence has arrived too late,” he said heavily. “My partner ’phones me that the Commissioner of Police has just informed him that Mrs. Saint-Anton—has committed suicide—”

They all gasped.

“—and has left behind a signed confession—that she killed Henry Radcliffe!”

Traynor threw a swift glance of bewilderment at Addison Kent. The novelist got slowly to his feet and stood with a hand on the back of his chair to steady himself. His face had gone white.

CHAPTER XXV

SCOTLAND YARD SITS IN

INTIMATELY as Tommy Traynor had known his old newspaper friend, he had never seen Addison Kent in such a mood as possessed him in the hour that followed. In spite of confirmation of the startling news from Police Headquarters—confirmation obtained over the telephone from the Commissioner himself—it was plain that the novelist was not only greatly disturbed by the sudden turn events had taken but puzzled as well.

Yet to Traynor, in the light of Mrs. Radcliffe's disclosures, the thing was understandable enough. The fact that "Mrs. Saint-Anton" was in reality this Countess Marinelli, a notorious adventuress, seemed to point to her suicide as a logical ending to such a life as she had led; a woman of her antecedents, finding herself in a position where her identity would become known and her past exposed, would be bold enough to choose such an end in preference to the legal punishment from which there could be no escape. Heaven alone knew what crimes she had committed, what secrets she preserved when she swallowed the small capsule of poison which she had concealed for this last desperate act! It was

what might be expected from an intrigante who had dallied with European politics.

Her confession of the present crime certainly put a period to the murder case in Traynor's mind, as it would in the minds of the police and of the public. Confessions of murder were not in the nature of a popular pastime. Her guilt had been known to Levering who for some reason dare not accuse the woman openly yet was so anxious to have her brought to book that he directed suspicion towards her by means of the shirt-cuff, making the accusation appear to come from Henry Radcliffe himself. If Levering were Alceste, as Kent suspected, the woman probably was his accomplice and sought the secret interview as an excuse for ensuring Radcliffe's presence in his room while the safe was being rifled down in the library. Discovering that he knew of the O'Carroll affair at the château, she had been seized by panic and had shot down the master of the house as she fled by way of the fire-escape. This sort of complication no doubt angered Alceste greatly and he determined to get rid of the woman who had been guilty of such a *faux pas* and work alone in the future.

Rather proud of this reasoning, Traynor was of a mind to discuss the situation with Kent, but found no opportunity of doing so in the rapid developments which followed. Kent was in no mood to talk; the news seemed to galvanize him to action and he behaved like a man who suddenly realizes that there is no time to be lost. As he talked to Headquarters his queries were almost staccatto with nervous energy. His chief concern now seemed to

be the arrest of the thieves who had robbed Armaund Lamont by the bold ruse of abducting the woman who was dearer to him than life itself. The name of Thompson was mentioned several times during the conversation and Traynor gathered that the butler had been heard from and that the police were about to close in on their quarry.

No sooner had Addison Kent hung up the receiver than he was eager to leave Hillcrest. He took Traynor to one side.

"I don't want to drag you away, Tommy, but you made me promise to tell you—"

"Something doing?"

"We are going over to Long Island to-night. It may prove an interesting trip."

That was all he would vouchsafe. The presence of Yeland in the car may have been responsible for the silence which Addison Kent maintained nearly all the way in. He gradually dropped out of the conversation and for the last half of the journey sat so wrapped in thought that he seemed oblivious of his surroundings. Occasionally he muttered to himself in his abstraction and once Traynor, who sat next to him, caught the words.

"Devilish! Devilish!" was the almost inaudible murmur.

They dropped the lawyer finally near his own apartment and Kent at once directed the chauffeur to drive as fast as he could to Minaki Annex.

"Thompson is waiting there," he explained.

"Thompson? He seems to be mixing in pretty freely

for a servant," commented Traynor. "I thought Fargey had the butler rather under suspicion."

"Hmph! Fargey!" grunted Kent. "He knows by now that that is at least one mistake he has made. Inspector Arthur Thompson, of Scotland Yard, is scarcely to be mentioned in the same breath with a man of Lieutenant Fargey's caliber on a difficult case."

"Inspector Ar—!" Traynor's surprise held him silent for a moment. "Good night! And he's been on the case from the first?"

"Yes. He has been on the trail of Alceste ever since the robbery in Norfolk—six months ago. It was he who looked me up and handed me Superintendent Brownlee's letter. I took him to the Commissioner and we have all been working quietly ever since."

"And even Bob Fargey didn't know—"

"Does Washington tell the policeman on the corner everything that goes on in the Secret Service?" countered Kent. "I dare not let even you into the secret before, Tommy. This Alceste is the most resourceful, slippery—Here we are! Out you go! We're due at Headquarters in twenty minutes or so and Thompson has a lot to say first."

Inspector Arthur Thompson, quiet, unassuming, smiled his deprecation as Tommy Traynor approached him in mock fear and shook hands. There was nothing of the butler in his manner now and Tommy marvelled at the perfect naturalness with which he had played the part in the Hillcrest household. There was a dignity and reserve about him, a confident carriage that bespoke self-

reliance and initiative. As Tommy listened to the report which Inspector Thompson had to present it did not need the glint in Kent's eyes to tell him that the discoveries made by the man from Scotland Yard were very important. There was no longer the need for preserving the incognito which he had maintained up to that very morning when Traynor and the others had parted from him to return to Hillcrest; during the succeeding hours Thompson's suspicions had been confirmed.

He had acted at once. The strange story which had been related by Lamont and the two ladies had given him a clue to the situation by reason of the special study which he had devoted to the history of Alceste's activities in Europe. The police records in regard to Alceste's personality were scant enough; by wearing rubber gloves he avoided leaving finger-prints behind him and the fact that his eyes were blue and that he was likely to prove of Irish ancestry practically sum-totalled the available information as to Alceste himself. He had never been captured and the few who had seen him on occasion could not recall his personal appearance with any accuracy; if these casual, untrained observers were to be believed, the man was tall and likewise short, dark and likewise fair, young and likewise old, but none who had stood looking into those eyes forgot them. They were blue.

It was Addison Kent's description of Levering's eyes that had made Inspector Thompson wonder if his man had been living right under his nose at Hillcrest for days. Traynor had told him what had happened at the

hospital and it might well be that Roger Levering was Alceste himself. The thought was somewhat disconcerting and it had sent Thompson on the trail of his new clue with all the determination that was in him.

That clue lay in the fact that the place to which the three had been abducted was some kind of private sanitarium which had everything to establish it as such—except patients! This was a favorite scheme of a certain clever doctor, known to Scotland Yard and “wanted” for sundry nefarious dealings—a Dr. Shane MacMurrough. As a surgeon this man’s prospects had appeared brilliant; for he had stirred things up during his college days and had carried off many honors. What had happened in his life to send him off on a tangent to criminal practices could only be surmised; the fact remained that he had figured in a scandalous affair in which his so-called “sanitarium” turned out to be nothing more nor less than a private gaol for the detention of wealthy “patients” whose relatives wished to get rid of them under the plea that they were insane. A “wild Irishman”, this MacMurrough, who had entangled himself in the political imbroglio also; the police believed that he knew more than a little about certain dark pages which had been written in that connection by the particular “Brotherhood” of which he was a member.

The two outstanding facts which interested Inspector Thompson were—first, that Dr. Shane MacMurrough was suspected of having assisted Alceste on occasion, although it was impossible to prove it by direct evidence; second, that MacMurrough had dropped out of sight at

the same time that Alceste disappeared. If Alceste were in the United States, why not Dr. Shane MacMurrough also? If the redoubtable Doctor had assisted Alceste before, might he not be doing so now? If the theft of Lamont's gems pointed to Alceste, the "sanitarium" to which they had been taken indicated Dr. MacMurrough. The description of the man who had visited Addison Kent in the hospital tallied with the description of the driver of the touring car who had so boldly compelled Lamont to open his own vaults and accompany him; Kent recognized the peculiar blue eyes as those of Roger Levering and the eyes of Alceste were blue; Roger Levering, therefore, was Alceste, had robbed the safe in Hillcrest, had purloined the collar of pearls out of the package which Miss Radcliffe had left in her room for a short time on Sunday evening, had subsequently visited Lamont after attempting Kent's life in Central Park, and had gone back to finish the job at the James B. Yates Memorial Hospital, having trailed Lamont's limousine and learned that Kent was still alive. The description of the man in charge of the "sanitarium" where the abducted trio had been taken was not out of harmony with the known description of Dr. Shane MacMurrough. This "sanitarium", then, was the retreat upon which the police must focus attention.

Thompson had telephoned his tip to Headquarters and the Commissioner had got in touch with the District Attorney's office and set the machinery in motion for fullest co-operation between State and city police. Several discreet plainclothes men had combed the neighborhood and

as a result of this quiet investigation the "sanitarium" had been located and unobtrusively had been under surveillance all day. The orders were that no arrivals at the place were to be accosted; but if anyone tried to leave the premises they were to be arrested at once. Lieutenant Fargey had been sent over to take charge with a Strong Arm Squad and a detail of motor-cycles. The place was to be raided at ten o'clock.

"Fargey, you say, Inspector? Were you talking to him at all?"

"Yes, Mr. Kent. He was very eager to take a hand in the capture—"

"Trying to steal your thunder, eh? Drunk with the wine of success over the Saint-Anton confession, he must climb aboard this other bandwagon! Well, that's like him!"

Traynor glanced quickly at Addison Kent into whose tone had crept an irritation that was unusual with him. Was it possible that Kent was jealous of Bob Fargey's triumph?

"I would not say that exactly," smiled Thompson. "I rather fancied he would resent it when he discovered my identity, you know,—feel a bit upset over it. But by Jove, he was quite friendly with me and congratulated me! Quite friendly. Turns out he's been suspicious of this man Levering—"

"From the first, I suppose," drawled Kent with amusement.

"Just so. He'd just gone to the Commissioner to tell him he thought Levering was this Alceste—was in the

office, I believe, when I telephoned. He requested to be allowed to take charge of the raid to-night. I rather fancy, you know, Fargey wants to redeem himself for letting the boulder slip through his fingers the way he did. Silly asses, all of us! What?"

"Yes—if we linger here much longer," agreed Kent, rising. "Fargey will get more satisfaction out of his raid if he has us as spectators and if we don't move, we'll be late for the performance. Here, Tommy, help me on with this coat—careful of that arm, dammit!"

"I say, old chap, you'd better go armed, you know," warned Thompson and he nodded approval as Addison Kent tapped his hip and passed an automatic to Traynor. "It's a meeting of the Irish and there's liable to be a bit of a fracas. It takes an Irishman to catch an Irishman—what?" and he chuckled at his own paraphrase.

He stepped out into the hall as he spoke and failed to see the startled look that suddenly came into the novelist's eyes. It did not escape Tommy Traynor, however, and he followed down the stairs to the waiting automobile with an uneasy feeling that beneath the surface of impending events flowed an undercurrent of danger which he could not fathom.

They stopped at the big graystone building in Center Street only long enough to learn that reserves under Kent's friend, Donovan, were just leaving in response to a call from Fargey. They were just in time to go along.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE EYES OF ALCESTE

IN silent majesty the full moon, a mellow ball of light, lifted slowly above the heavily-wooded ridge to the east; across its golden face the lacey fingers of the tree-tops slipped as if reluctant to release it to the star-sown sky. A bird stirred and twittered sleepily in the nearby leafage and the warm summer night was under-toned by the chant of crickets in the wayside grass. In the neighboring village a hound bayed and was answered by the sharp bark of a dog on a distant farmstead. Down in the river bottom an owl whoood, tremulous, uncanny.

Lieutenant Robert Fargey parted the bushes and pointed.

"Over to the left there a ways—you can see one o' the gables an' a chimney sticking up against the sky," he directed in a low voice.

Kent, Traynor and Thompson peered forth with interest. The time for action was at hand. From the rise on which they stood the quiet countryside stretched in the moonlight. There was nothing of alarm in that peaceful scene; the far-off staccatto of a motor-cycle was innocent enough. Yet each of the four men knew that every road converging on the point where they stood,

disappearing like white ribbons into the woodlands, was under vigilant patrol—that concealed in the undergrowth a close-drawn cordon of police surrounded the comfortable old house that stood back from the road, almost hidden behind its sheltering elms.

Fargey's preparations left nothing to be desired. He had met the reserves some miles down the road and turned them over to Detective-Sergeant Hayes for disposition in their proper places. He had made good use of his rural constables as outlying pickets. Great care had been taken to keep everything under cover in order not to arouse the suspicions of their quarry. The touring car had returned to the place early that morning and was still in the yard; no attempt had been made by anyone in the house to depart during the day.

"We've got 'em an' got 'em right!" exulted Fargey as he finished explaining the situation.

The elation in his voice was not that merely of official approval and satisfaction; it was that of a man keyed to a high pitch of subdued excitement—a man who concentrates every fibre of his being upon achieving—publicity? Surely it was deeper than that, thought Addison Kent, as he studied the lieutenant stealthily. It was revenge Bob Fargey was seeking to-night—revenge upon Roger Levering for bamboozling him, for coolly slipping through his fingers, for making him appear ridiculous? Possibly. Fargey's vanity would be unable to stand ridicule or censure at Headquarters; he was much too jealous-minded himself for that.

"Time's up," said Fargey, extinguishing his flash-

light again as soon as he had glanced at his watch. "Follow me carefully, gentlemen, please. Watch your step. This is a surprise party."

In single file they made their way slowly down the hill to the road and advanced towards the gate. A light was burning in the lower hall; but outside of this the house was in darkness. Hayes and Donovan joined the group as they went lightly across the lawn to the verandah, hands in coat pockets, automatics gripped for instant use. There was no telling what the next few minutes might beget and as Tommy Traynor brought up the rear, a position to which he had been peremptorily relegated by Fargey, he experienced a genuine thrill of excitement.

Inspector Thompson pointed silently to the brass plate alongside the door—"Dr. H. B. Shane." Lieutenant Fargey pulled the knob of the door-bell and they could hear the tinkling of the bell within quite distinctly; but there was no sound of an approaching footstep in answer to the summons. As Fargey gave the bell an impatient tug, Kent quietly tried the door. It was locked.

"Locked, eh?" muttered Fargey. He scowled for a moment, thinking. To break down the door by force would rob them of the advantage of surprise for which he had hoped.

He took a key-ring from his pocket and was about to insert a skeleton key in the lock when Kent seized his arm and cautioned silence with a look. It was then that they heard stealthy footsteps inside, approaching the door. The sound of bolts being quietly slipped followed,

the door opened slowly and a man stepped out, finger to lips, closing the door behind him.

A murmur of surprise passed among them as they saw that it was Donovan who had slipped away unnoticed and had gone around the house.

"I found a window open at the rear, Loot'nant," he explained simply.

With a grunt of approval his superior pushed the door open and they all tip-toed into the hall. Hayes closed the door carefully and they stood where they were, hastily surveying their surroundings in the dull light that came from the hanging lamp in its frosted globe. To the immediate right and left two doors opened off the hall; each stood wide open. Directly in front of them a wide staircase ascended at the right; the hall extended past it to a third door which was shut. An old-fashioned hall rack and a hall bench of golden quartered oak were the only articles of furniture in sight; the rugs on the floor were costly.

The silence was oppressive; their own breathing was audible. Did it mean an uninhabited house or was it portentous of enemies who concealed their presence but to make their attack more effective?

Lieutenant Fargey motioned with his police automatic and they followed him into the room on the right—evidently used as a consulting-room. Nobody was in sight there. They crossed to the left-hand room and went through it without discovering any sign of life or place of concealment; it was fitted up as a bed-sitting-room and

Traynor recognized it as the room Rose had described to him in detail, the room where she had met her mother.

Very cautiously, ready for any emergency, they crept along the hall now to the closed door. Lieutenant Fargey quietly turned the knob and found the door unlocked. The faint but unmistakable, sweetly pungent odor of chloroform greeted their nostrils and they saw that the place had been used as a sort of surgery and library combined.

Addison Kent pushed forward, his eyes moving swiftly and no detail escaping him. He picked up and examined several pinches of cottonwool that lay on the plate-glass surface of a small table near the window; there was a tinge of blood upon them and, as nearly as he could tell, it was fresh. He went over to the case of surgical instruments and gazed at them intently. As Tommy Traynor watched him, some instinct told him that all this was of importance or at least that Addison Kent considered it so. But it was apparent that Fargey's mind was focused only upon the importance of keeping a sharp lookout against the possibility of a shot in the back. He waved Kent away impatiently.

A door at the right, opened by Hayes, disclosed a downward flight of steps. Fargey motioned him back and himself ran down noiselessly. He shot the bolt in another door at the bottom and stepped back with a muttered imprecation at the shadowy figure of a man who promptly thrust the muzzle of a pistol into his face. Fargey laughed a little at his own nervousness. It was

one of his own men who had closed in on all exits, as instructed.

Wiping his forehead on his coatsleeve, the lieutenant of detectives rejoined the group at the head of the steps and curtly explained.

"They must be upstairs," he whispered. "Be ready, everybody. We're goin' up now."

At the foot of the stairs they paused to listen and Lieutenant Fargey sent the beam of his flashlight dancing upward. They climbed slowly, one step at a time, hugging the wall, eyes unwaveringly on the landing at the top.

They reached it at last without a sound to indicate what lay beyond in the darkness of the upper hall. A short flight of stairs continued around the turn. Fargey thrust his electric torch through the uprights of the banister above his head, snapped on the switch and ducked back; but as no pistol fire was drawn by this manoeuvre, he advanced stealthily. The upper hall was likewise empty.

Several doors were visible, all open but one. The carpet was thick and they made almost no sound at all as they crept from room to room, investigating. Every bedroom was empty; so also one which was fitted up as a den. The smell of cigarette smoke still hung here in the air.

Alert, every nerve at tension, automatics ready, they joined Donovan who had gone on guard outside the closed door. What lay beyond that door? By process of elimination it was the only room which could reward their search. Kent pointed silently to the hasp and

padlock which fastened it on the outside and Fargey motioned Hayes forward to pry off the hasp.

To their straining ears then came a sound from within the room—the first sound of any presence in that house except their own. They looked at each other in the bright rays of the flashlights, surprise on every face. Had their men been so sure of themselves that they had gone to bed with unconcern? The sound was recognizable at once—the heave of a body on a spring mattress!

Again Fargey motioned to Hayes. Kent might stop to wonder why the room should be padlocked on the outside; but just now Fargey thought only of getting inside that room as quickly as possible. He leaned forward in his eagerness, body bent, breathing rapidly in his excitement.

Hayes stepped back and saluted. Slowly the knob turned under his superior's hand and the door gave an inch. Satisfied then that it was not bolted on the inside, Fargey jerked his head in command and kicked the door wide on its hinges.

Together they all sprang into the room, the electric torches flooding the place with blinding light in every direction.

"Hands up!" shouted Fargey hoarsely, levelling his weapon.

Traynor thought he was prepared for anything. He fully expected gun-play; but there was none. Surprise held them all motionless for a moment.

The room was small and almost bare of furniture—a bed and a chair. The floors were uncarpeted. One small

window alone was visible, high in the wall, iron-barred. On the bed lay a figure beneath the bedclothes, face to the wall. The back of a head, covered with unkempt black hair, protruded from the bedspread at one end—a head with a white bandage encircling it.

"Hands up! Quick, you!" commanded Fargey again, covering the form on the bed.

Then very slowly, as if the effort were painful, the form turned beneath the bedclothes, facing them. The man made no move to show his hands. His eyes were blindfolded by the bandage. A chill ran down Tommy Traynor's spine as he saw that white face turn to them.

"I say, watch out for the beggar, Lieutenant," warned Thompson. "He's going to shoot!"

"Want me to plug you as you lay?" cried Fargey at the limit of nervous restraint.

Addison Kent pushed aside the lieutenant's gun, stepped calmly to the bed, took hold of the bedclothes and flung them back.

"We know you, Levering!" Fargey's voice came gratingly. "No use tryin' to cover up your eyes! No use—!" He broke off in astonishment.

No man with a fast-spitting automatic in either hand lay on that bed. The man there was as helpless as a baby. He was strapped and buckled in a strait-jacket—the contrivance used to control demented or delirious patients!

After that first mutter of astonishment which passed their lips, dead silence fell in the room as they stared at

the creature on the bed. Thompson was the first to break it.

"My word, Mr. Kent!" he murmured in a shocked voice. "Now there is no room for doubt that MacMURrough was running this place. This is his work. The bounder has kept a genuine lunatic in the house to carry out the scheme!—to deceive anybody who got too inquisitive! By Jove!"

Addison Kent said not a word. Keenly he studied the man in the strait-jacket, then bent over and gently removed the bandage.

The immediate result was startling. The man rapidly grew as violent as the strait-jacket would permit. He tossed about, rolled to the edge of the bed, swung his feet to the floor and, before anyone could interfere, butted his strapped-up body against Kent so forcibly that the novelist fell back into Traynor's arms.

He charged at Fargey who promptly knocked him back on the bed with a cruel uppercut to the chin.

"Would, would you?" he snarled. He sprang forward, but with a cry of protest, Kent interfered.

"Can't you see the poor devil's helpless!" cried Kent, his eyes blazing with anger. "Look at him!"

The man's ravings and curses had dwindled to a meaningless mumble. He was crying now. The tears rolled down his white cheeks. Gently Kent replaced the bandage across the bloodshot eyes, talking soothingly as to a hurt child. Almost at once the man quieted.

"Can you tell us who you are?" suggested Kent in mat-

ter-of-fact tones. "Try to think. We are friends. We want to help you. Who are you?"

"Friends!" muttered the fellow. "Friends? FRIENDS!" he shouted. He threw back his head, opened his mouth and gave vent to a loud peal of laughter that sent a shiver through Tommy Traynor. It was terrible, that laughter—wild! "I have no friends! They all died!"

"Who are you?" repeated Addison Kent quietly.

"Who am I? Well, who am I? I'm nobody. That's who I am—Mr. Nobody from Nowhere! NO! WAIT! I'm—I'm Mr.— Mr.—" The raucous voice dwindled off into a gibber of mouthed nonsense—the gibbering intonations of insanity.

Kent looked helplessly around at them.

"Poor unfortunate beggar!" muttered Thompson.

"Unfortunate nothing!" cried Lieutenant Robert Fargey scornfully. "That don't fool me for a minute, see! If Levering's really gone crazy, it's the on'y thing'll save him from goin' up the river; but I miss my guess—"

Inspector Thompson's look of quiet disdain made him pause.

"You believe this man to be Roger Levering?"

"Surest thing you know! I ain't taking no chances—"

"Did you note the color of his eyes?"

"Well!" glared Fargey resentfully.

"The eyes of this man are dark brown. Those of Levering are light blue; Kent can verify that. So are the eyes of Alceste; I can verify that. This man is quite

apparently one of Dr. Shane MacMurrough's insane victims. God knows who he may prove to be!"

He turned to Addison Kent for approval of his statements. Fargey knew that he spoke the truth but he leaned forward and peered long and earnestly as the novelist once more carefully removed the bandage. There was no mistake about the color of the bloodshot eyes; they were a chestnut brown. Kent restored the bandage and stood back, nodding thoughtfully.

"Your best plan is to leave one of your men to stay with the poor devil," suggested Inspector Thompson, "until you can arrange for his removal. I think a doctor ought to see him first."

Lieutenant Fargey, almost beside himself with disappointment over this culmination of his expectations, gritted his teeth in a passion. He was obsessed by the conviction that he was being duped in some manner and he refused the evidence of his own eyes. Roughly he caught Thompson by the arm and pulled him out of the way.

"The hell you say!" he exploded. "That's our man, I tell you! And by—I'll take no chances—!"

Before they realized what he was doing he had sprung forward and was in the act of thrusting the muzzle of his automatic against the bandaged temple of the man on the bed when Kent leaped. The novelist was just in time to knock the gun aside as it went off, the bullet spitting harmlessly through the ceiling.

"Fargey!" Kent stared at him, dumfounded. "In

God's name, man, have you gone crazy yourself? Control yourself!" he said sharply.

"It's just bluffin'," panted Fargey. "I wasn't goin' to plug him, you fool!" he protested. "You come near makin' me do it!"

Again the wild peal of laughter broke from the man in the strait-jacket. They stared at each other in awe as it dwindled away once more into the meaningless mumble.

Then across the brooding quiet of the night came a new sound that drove every thought but one from their minds—a fusillade of pistol shots. The firing came from the direction of the river, several hundred yards from the house. The open window at the rear through which Donovan had climbed! The men they were after had escaped from the house before the police entered it!

Shouting to Donovan to remain behind in the room until a man could be sent to relieve him and instructing him to follow then as fast as he could, Fargey flew out the door, dashed downstairs and out of the house, followed by the others.

They raced across the lawn in the direction of the firing as hard as they could go—across the road—over a fence into a meadow—over another fence into the bush and down a long slope to the very bank of the river. Along the highways behind, specks of light were speeding through the dark and the staccatto of motor-cycles seemed like echoes of the cracking pistol-shots that mapped the location of the running fight.

The firing ceased all at once and a loud halloo was sent out from a point over to the left. A police whistle sounded with piercing distinctness and the signal was taken up by the squad at the house and went relaying in every direction into the distance. Escape from that network of pursuers was next to impossible.

"You hear that?" Fargey had stopped them with up-raised hand to listen and he turned jubilantly as he spoke. "We've got 'em! That signal means we've got our birds. Come on!"

The party hurried along the riverbank and presently came within sight of a group, gathered about the base of a huge elm tree. A plainclothes man, bathed in the light from the electric torches, stepped forth as they came up and saluted Fargey. It was McVey.

"There was on'y one of 'em, sir. He broke cover ten minutes ago an' showed fight. He wouldn't be taken alive."

"Good work, good work, boys!" approved the lieutenant as he strode towards the tree. The men fell back.

For a long moment they gazed down upon the still form that lay there—a man of middle age with iron-gray hair, brushed back in a pompadour from a low, wide forehead. Inspector Thompson identified him at once.

"It is Dr. Shane MacMurrough," he said.

Addison Kent stood close to Lieutenant Fargey, silently watching him. The officer's heavy jaw was set,

his hands clenched. The expression of his eyes was hard, triumphant.

"Two!" he muttered.

As if in answer, Inspector Thompson spoke again.

"There is only one of them here. Alceste did not return to the house. I hardly expected we would find him here. The bally eel is too slippery for that. Alceste has got clean away again, by Jove! What?"

Kent said nothing. His eyes were still fixed reflectively upon Lieutenant Fargey—in doubt as to whether congratulations or condolences upon the result of the night's work were in order, thought Tommy Traynor.

CHAPTER XXVII

BOLD PLAY

UP and down, up and down the room Addison Kent continued his restless pacing, a fixed furrow between his eyes, so deep in concentrated thought that he was oblivious of his surroundings. It was nearly two o'clock in the morning, but the excitements of the night left neither of the two friends inclined for sleep. They had returned to Kent's rooms half an hour before and the abstraction which the author had exhibited during the journey back to town had become profound as soon as they were alone at Minaki Annex. He seemed nervous and worried and Tommy Traynor watched him anxiously from the depths of a Morris chair.

"If I'd known this thing was going to bother you as much as this, Ad, I'd never have got you into it," he protested. "For heaven's sake, sit down somewhere! You make me nervous. Do you know that you haven't said two words in the past fifteen minutes? Be a little more sociable. What's wrong, anyway?"

Kent paused in front of him and looked at him strangely.

"Wrong?" he repeated. The hand of his uninjured

arm clenched unconsciously. "It's all wrong—everything—terribly wrong!" He resumed his pacing.

"Nonsense! The shooting of MacMurrough on top of the suicide has been too much for the state of your nerves with that arm in a sling—"

Kent stopped in front of him again and Traynor looked up with some surprise at the tensity of the other's expression.

"Tommy," he asked slowly, "what would you say if I told you that in spite of everything that has transpired—in spite of the woman's suicide—in spite of her signed confession—I still believe she did not kill Henry Radcliffe?"

"I'd say you were crazy," responded Traynor promptly.

"And supposing I told you that I was beginning to wonder if Bob Fargey was not right after all—out there to-night—the man on the bed—"

"What! Was Alceste, you mean?"

"Yes."

"I'd say you were getting crazier every minute!" Traynor smiled skeptically. "What on earth next! I saw his eyes and they were as brown—as a horse-chestnut!"

The novelist's solemn expression remained unchanged.

"There's something infernally queer about it, now that I think it over," he said slowly. "I saw something which perhaps escaped your notice—when I was removing the bandage. The man's scalp in one spot was black—like the hair—as if it had been hurriedly—dyed!"

"Dyed! But that doesn't mean anything. The eyes were brown, I tell you. You saw that yourself. You can't get around that fact."

"No. They were brown. But I am wondering—I have been trying to recall where I—Tommy, did you ever hear of an operation whereby the iris of the eye could be—tattooed?"

"Tattooed?" Traynor sat up in his chair with a jerk. "The color changed?"

"From light to dark—yes. I should not have said 'the iris'; it is performed upon the cornea in front of the iris—in cases where through injury or otherwise a blemish has occurred in the natural pigment of the iris."

"Gre—at Scott!"

"But it is a very painful operation and only a small portion of the area can be tattooed at a time; the complete job would take weeks. That is what I am wondering about. It is only a little over four days ago that Levering visited me at the hospital and his eyes then were blue—light blue."

"Could that man have been the fellow mentioned in the message Levering received?" asked Traynor thoughtfully. "You know—'O.C.'?"

"I have considered that possibility." Kent shook his head. "MacMurrough must have written that message, Tommy. There is every reason for believing that the letters 'O.C.' stand for O'Carroll, the man who figured in the duel at the château. But I have a reason for thinking that O'Carroll is elsewhere than in that room we left a little while ago with a policeman on guard. No, if

the man is not what he appeared to be—an insane victim of MacMurrough's—he is Alceste himself.”

“Yet the color of the eyes could not be changed in four days, you say?”

“That's what puzzles me. I seem to have a faint recollection of having read something somewhere about a new discovery or an operation of the kind that was performed in much shorter order—in fact, the whole operation completed at one time. It was quite a while ago—By George! I believe I ran across the item while I was clipping Old Country newspapers for the file. Look up ‘Surgery’, Tommy—in the file beside you—under ‘Eye’—Let me have the folder.”

Eagerly Kent took it over to the desk and began rapidly to go through the budget of clippings which the folder contained. In a moment he held out a tiny clipping, his face alight with satisfaction—just a few lines of type from a medical journal, briefly describing the discovery of Dr. Shane MacMurrough.

“MacMurrough's own special process!” cried Traynor with growing excitement. “That accounts for the chloroform smell and the—Gee Whiz! Alceste himself! For sheer nerve—!”

Addison Kent was already at the telephone.

“Police Headquarters!” he instructed in a low, tense voice.

“Pay-station calling,” responded the languid voice of the telephone operator unexpectedly.

“Hey! Get off the line! What?—Who? Donovan? Well, for the love of—You what?—What's happened?”

A strange expression flitted across Kent's face as he listened to the detective. Traynor leaned forward.

"What is it, Ad?"

But for a moment after he had slowly hung up the receiver, Kent sat silent, still clutching the instrument. He turned with a quizzical look.

"Always twenty minutes late, Tommy! I've got the cow's tail beaten a mile when it comes to being behind! Donovan slipped out to a pay-station just now to tip me off to the fact that the man in the strait-jacket has got away."

"Got a—What's that?" His incredulity was apparent.

"He escaped a couple of hours ago—in the uniform of the policeman who had been sent to the room to stand guard over him. Officer McCann went up to confer with his fellow guard and found him lying on the bed, in the strait-jacket and gagged! Alceste had slipped out of the thing somehow—that was provided for, you may be sure—and the first thing 'Flatey' knew the muzzle of an automatic was staring him in the face. Alceste walked calmly downstairs in uniform—outdoors—helped himself to a motor-cycle in the yard and was miles away before any suspicions were aroused. By the Lord Harry! but we've got to give him credit, Tommy. He's smooth! He's nervey!"

He got to his feet and resumed his restless pacing, deep in thought once more.

"Alceste!" he muttered. "The man was Alceste! Eyes bloodshot, face white with the pain he'd been through

and was still suffering! Caught in a tight corner, surrounded by police,—knew his eyes would give him away—bluffs it out right there under our noses—and gets away with it! And—gets—a-way—with it! Oh, the nerve of it!—And Fargey with his pistol right at his head! Yet he deserved a fighting chance and I'm glad I—”

His voice trailed away. New lines of worry grew in his face until it looked almost haggard. Traynor watched him breathlessly; for he saw that there was something else which Kent had not yet divulged. He waited patiently. The novelist's voice was edged with suppressed excitement as he stopped midway of the room and turned slowly on his heel.

“O'Carrol is the murderer,” he said with solemn finality. “We must find him. No matter what the consequences, it is our duty. Tommy, I am being slowly forced to a conclusion which I have hesitated to entertain. Every time it has faced me, I have set it aside as a foolish idea. But the proof keeps crowding it in on me. It has haunted me for days and I have refused to entertain it as being altogether preposterous—imbecile! I have been afraid to put this fear into words! Tommy, I want you to prepare yourself to receive the shock of your life. It is—awful!—awful!”

Scarcely knowing what to expect, Traynor watched him and waited. Kent had sunk into a chair and he pinched his fingers across his eyelids, unable for a moment to proceed.

"Wh—what is it, old man?" he whispered at last. He tried to ask it in a normal tone.

He saw Addison Kent lift his head, saw his lips open—saw him stiffen in his chair, every nerve alert, gaze fixed unwinkingly across the room! Following the direction of that silent, intent regard he saw stealing beneath the hall door, visible through the open doorway of the room in which they sat,—the white edge of a sealed envelope!

In three bounds Traynor was across the room. He yanked open the door, levelling his automatic. Then he dashed out into the hallway and there followed a scramble of footsteps down the stair.

"Please! Please, Mister! I didn't do nuthin'. Honest to Gawd! I didn't."

"I'm not going to hurt you. Cut out that kicking, you young brat! Get up there!"

"I didn't do nuthin', Mister," pleaded the piping voice again. "A man give me a 'V' to bring that letter here—a motorcycle cop, with goggles on. How's I to know—?"

Half dragging the ragged urchin to the doorway, Traynor paused on the threshold. Then with a cry of alarm, he released his hold on the boy's collar and sprang towards Kent's chair—towards Kent with the torn envelope at his feet and a sheet of paper quivering in his hand; Kent, white-faced and speechless!

Traynor fairly snatched the paper, his eyes racing over what had been written there with a lead-pencil:

“Addison Kent—

“They say one good turn deserves another. You saved my life to-night. You are on the right trail. Why do you not follow it? O’Carrol is within your reach.

—Alceste.’ ”

Weakly Traynor sat down in the nearest chair, wetting his lips.

“W—well, I’ll—be—d-amned!” he stuttered.

Without a word Kent got up, crossed to his desk and pulled open a drawer. He took out two extra clips of cartridges and passed one of them to Traynor.

“See that you have a full magazine in that gun, Tommy.”

A sudden calmness possessed Kent now. He sat down at the desk, drew the telephone towards him and gave a number.

“Is that Police Headquarters?—Can you tell me if Lieutenant Fargey is anywhere around?—Off duty, you say? Has he gone home, d’you know?—Yes, I want to find him immediately. Thanks, but I want to see him personally—No, it’s all right.”

He rang off, waited a moment, then called up the nearest garage where he ran a monthly account.

“Hello, George—Addison Kent at the Annex—I want speed to-night. Send Crawford, if he’s available—Yes, right away.”

Traynor jumped to his feet.

“Where are we going?”

“Bob Fargey lives with a private family in Harlem. At present they are up state on a farm and he is baching it. We are going to the house.”

"And after we pick up Bob—then what?"

"Then, Tommy, we are going to interview the real murderer of Henry Radcliffe and learn the full truth."

"O'Carroll?"

"O'Carroll."

As the car bore rapidly across town Kent fell silent. Traynor, keyed to highest tension, could hardly repress the desire for loquacity; but the novelist's face was mask-like and he refused to talk.

"You will know all presently—if we are not once more too late." He leaned forward. "Step on her, Crawford! I'll pay the fines."

The purr of the powerful motor rose to a roar as the speeding car took the turn into Lexington Ave., on two wheels and cut straight away northward towards High Bridge Park. At that hour the streets were deserted and when they swung the final corner of their mad journey there was only one light visible in the row of ancient houses—a light in an upper room.

They stopped in front of it. Kent sprang out and hurried up the walk to verify the number. But there was no need of that; for a head appeared at the open window and against the square of light they recognized Lieutenant Robert Fargey himself. He was in his shirt-sleeves.

"Hello, there! That you, Kent? What are you doing over here at this hour? Who's that with you?"

"Traynor—just the two of us."

"What do you want?"

"I've come for you, Bob, because—"

"So? Well, the door's not locked. Come right on up." His head and shoulders disappeared.

Addison Kent's hand was extended to grasp the brass knob of the front door when with an involuntary gasp he recoiled against Traynor who had followed up the steps. At the same time there reached the latter's ears a dull, muffled explosion from within the house.

Through the door, leaping for the stairs, pell-mell upward they went. Traynor saw Kent enter the lighted room,—saw his set, blanched face turn as Tommy reached the open door. An acrid odor struck his nostrils—

Then he shrank in dismay. Across the table in the centre of the room was sprawled the inert form of Fargey.

Suddenly alert, Traynor swept the room with the muzzle of his own weapon.

"O'Carrol? Alceste? Watch out! They're here! This is their work!"

He looked up wonderingly as Kent laid a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Alceste's work—yes, indirectly." He nodded to the table. "The search is ended, old man. O'Carrol and Fargey are one!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

FACE UP

TOMMY TRAYNOR felt a momentary nausea. Dazedly he leaned against the wall. Fargey! Bob Fargey, whom he had known so long and intimately! The shock of the revelation left him speechless. A quilt had been dragged off the bed in the corner and lay on the floor beside the table with its silent burden. He watched Kent unroll it and pick from its folds the police automatic.

"He wrapped it around the gun in order not to have the whole neighborhood coming in here to see what was the matter," Kent explained as he pointed to the bullet-holes in the quilt.

A manilla envelope, fat with folded papers, caught his eye; he saw that it was addressed to himself and marked "Personal." A glance at those freshly written foolscap sheets was enough to establish the document as a written explanation of Fargey's tragic act. Kent sat down on the edge of the bed and began to read, passing each page to Traynor as he finished it.

"Dear Kent," it began. "When you read this I'll be away, solving the One Big Mystery. I have a hunch to-night that things are not breaking right for me and

that the end is near; for, of course, I will not be taken alive. I saw to-night that you suspect the truth and word has just reached me that the "lunatic" has escaped from the strait-jacket—got clean away; I know for sure now what I strongly suspected at the time without knowing why—that that guy was Alceste himself. My big mistake was in not pinching him on the spot but that blue-eye business had me guessing for fair. Alceste will 'get' me sooner or later for to-night's work, as you will understand better when you have finished reading this. I intend to roll the bones to the last, though, as I have from the first in this thing. If the luck goes against me, I've no kick coming and I aint squealing.

"There's some things I'd like you and Tommy Traynor to know about. Tommy was always fair and I think you are, too. I want to put it up to you and perhaps you'll be able to think more kindly of me. If you can't do what I ask about this thing, that's all right. Do whatever you think best.

"I killed Henry Radcliffe *by accident* when I fired into the room *at the woman*. I swear that this is the truth, so help me God! I had no quarrel with that poor gentleman. God forgive me! I even thought that I was saving his life when I fired at that cursed hell-cat; for they were struggling for the little gun in Radcliffe's hand and she was getting the best of him, being strong as a horse in spite of her gray hair. I saw red at sight of her and lost my head completely. Just as I pulled the trigger they swung around and he got the bullet I intended

for her. He crumpled up in her arms and she didn't see me. I beat it.

"You know now she was the Countess Marinelli and you know what happened at the château over in France years ago. Yelland told me about Mrs. Radcliffe's history. I never was much for believing in Fate and all that, but it's mighty queer how things turn out sometimes, ain't it? To think that that poor little woman was mixed up in this thing like that and me not knowing it. I didn't see her that night of the dance at the château; I's out in the grounds with the Countess at the time. I wouldn't have recognized her anyways, for she must've changed a lot. To think that she was an eye-witness of that duel—right on deck and me talking to her and not knowing it and she not knowing me! I've changed a lot myself and even the Marinelli woman didn't know me till I showed her a scar she recognized and she saw I knew the facts.

"Well, anyways, you know I had reason for hating her; if she'd stayed away from the United States everything would have been different, but when all that past I'd been trying to forget was raked up and flung in my face—But let me tell about the duel. My father and I were estranged but God knows I bore him no ill will. I did not know it was him I was fighting that night. I'd arrived late that night from Paris and didn't know who was on hand at the Countess's party. She took care not to let me know about my father and she arranged the whole thing with the cunning of the Jezebel she was. She was mixing around pretty free in politics and I knew she was in the pay of the German Government; what I

didn't know was that she'd sold some information to Russia and that my father knew of it. He belonged to a brotherhood of Irish patriots that were mixing up in things they had no business to; it was that we had quarrelled over, him and me. The Countess had been trying to get me to act as go-between for her in another little matter and she thought if she could get something on me, she could make me do as she wanted. So she arranged it to use me as the means of silencing my father, who had threatened to tell what he knew against her. She was a fascinating woman when she wanted to be in those days and I was young and foolish—a devil-may-care young blade and no mistake. She had my father on a string, too, and in our masquerade costumes and masks neither of us knew the other. She got us into the fight over an alleged insult and—you know what happened.

“I hid for a few days in a village of charcoal burners not far away, working as one of them and blackened well. Then as nothing happened, I got over my first scare and planned to work my way to some seaport where I could ship as a stoker on a vessel bound for America. I had often thought of going to the United States and it seemed the safest place for me. I had no trouble getting away; the police didn't seem to be on my trail at all.

“Once on this side of the ocean, I went West and buried myself in a mining camp for a while. I changed my name and altered my appearance as much as possible and after a while I began to get a new slant on things

and began to fit right in as an American citizen. I made lots of friends and it was through one of them that I got into police work; it seemed a good line to take to keep posted and get first warning of any trouble coming my way from France.

"But nothing like that happened and I finally drifted to New York and joined the Force. As the years went by I came to forget the past like a bad dream and I lived for my work and was happy. I tried to do my duty and if I do say it myself, my rapid promotion is the proof that I succeeded. I liked my work and it came to mean everything to me. Nobody can say that Bob Fargey was not a good citizen of the United States. Things went along fine until two weeks ago.

"Then I got a bad jolt. I got a note one day, signed with the secret symbol of the Brotherhood of Irish patriots to which my father had belonged. The man who wrote it asked me to meet him in a certain cheap café on the East Side and, of course, I went. It was this Doc MacMurrough. He was pretty keen on faces and I'd met him in the old days with my father; he'd recognized me on the street, or thought he did. The family resemblance was strong enough for him to start looking me up and he wasn't one to overlook any bets. He knew all about what happened at the château. How he found out I don't know; but he knew and had gum-shoed around on my trail. I tried to bluff him, but it wouldn't work and what he had to tell me got my goat right off the bat,

"He said he was my friend and a sworn enemy of the Marinelli woman. He gave that as his reason for approaching me. She had come to the States after a bad mix-up on the Continent—her old game of double-crossing somebody. You can't do that in spy-work over there without getting knifed some dark night. To make a long story short, MacMurrough told me that she had brought along with her my *dossier* and intended to use it against me for her own ends as soon as she located me. When I asked him how he knew this he told me of Roger Levering who was a close friend of his and who had it in for his aunt. He said that they were staying with the Radcliffe's at Hillcrest and suggested that with Levering's help it would be a cinch to go through her papers in the safe and destroy the evidence against me, if I cared to take the risk. He was only passing the tip as an old friend of my father's; for he said he realized that I had been duped by the woman and was not responsible for the death of my father.

"This man, MacMurrough, was as smooth as they make them and he seemed so sincere about it that I didn't tumble to his game then. I thanked him and said I'd see. The more I thought it over, the more important it seemed for me to destroy those papers; with them out of the way I could give the Marinelli woman the laugh and pinch her if she got nasty. Later I met the two of them at the same place—MacMurrough and Levering. Levering pretended he was afraid to assist in stealing the document, but MacMurrough pointed out how easy it was. All he had to do was to get the combination of the

safe and borrow the key to his aunt's deposit-box; I would slip in when the coast was clear, open the safe and the box, take out the papers I was interested in, lock everything up again, hand him back the key and that was all there was to it. Levering agreed to do his part then.

"But still I hesitated. I asked for more time to think it over. Then I learned through MacMurrough that 'Mrs. Saint-Anton', as she called herself, was about to have me traced by a private detective agency and I got desperate. I went out to Hillcrest that very night, dressed in old clothes. I had no intention of attempting anything so rash as murder, let alone that of Henry Radcliffe. I didn't dream that he was connected in any way with the events at the château. I went out to the house with the one idea of getting those papers which she held against me and destroying them.

"Levering had been warned by MacMurrough to watch out for me and he was waiting. He let me in through a window into the library. He had the combination to the safe and it was while we were trying to open it that we heard the voices up in Radcliffe's room, raised in anger. We were both scared somebody might come down to the library and Levering sent me up the fire-escape to see what was doing.

"As I say, I saw red at sight of her after all these years—the cause of all my troubles, still trying to do me injury and prevent me living my new life in peace. I wrapped the bottom of the window curtain around the little gun Levering had pressed into my hand as I

slipped out the library window—the woman's own pearl-handled automatic, as it turned out—and fired.

“When I saw the terrible result of that shot I came to my senses mighty fast and slipped along the fire escape to take a look in at Traynor's window to make sure he hadn't been wakened. He was sitting up in bed! I just had time to swing over the rail and hang from the grating in the shadow beneath when he came out. I was thankful that the moon went under a cloud just then. I could hear him talking to himself and knew he hadn't spotted me. As soon as he went inside the room again, I dropped quietly to the ground and beat it back to the library.

“When I whispered to Levering what had happened he gave me one awful look and called me all kinds of a damned fool. I handed him back the little gun and I saw a devilish look come into his eyes. He told me then that he saw only one way out of the mess. It was the woman's gun; he had stolen it out of her trunk in order to be armed for this occasion. He proposed to obtain a gold pencil she owned and write the accusation on Radcliffe's shirt-cuff; then, if I could arrange to get myself detailed to the case, between us we could cover my tracks very nicely. He admitted having no love for her and while the scheme was devilish, I wasn't exactly crazy with love for her myself. It seemed the only way out and we arranged it that way.

“Just as we were trying the combination on the safe again we heard someone coming downstairs and just had time to hide behind a bookcase in the corner when in came

Miss Radcliffe to try and find the combination to the safe in the desk. She had the case of pearls in her hand and took it away with her again. I was sweating pretty freely about then; things were getting mighty risky and I was anxious to get the papers and beat it.

"As soon as I had them, we locked everything up again and I got away O.K. I didn't tumble at that time to the big game Levering and MacMurrough were playing—not even when I learned about the robbery next morning. I didn't suspect Levering until Sunday night, after I heard about this here Alceste being loose—from Lamont—and found out that the pearls were gone, too. I began then to size things up and felt sure that the whole thing MacMurrough and Levering had in mind was to get me into a position where I couldn't say a word no matter what they tried to pull off—where they could even call on me to help them cover up their own tracks in these jewel robberies. They had everything planned. It was MacMurrough who faked the 'phone message that got Traynor off the scene Sunday morning.

"I was wild when I saw the mess I'd got myself into—and the disappearance of the shirt-cuff didn't help matters so's you could notice. I didn't think there was one chance in a hundred of recovering it and I began to wonder if Levering was stringing me and hadn't written the message at all. I tried to locate MacMurrough; but he'd made himself scarce.

"Then Sunday night Levering slipped me the good word that he'd found the cuff. We know now he listened to Mrs. Stanton—Mrs. Radcliffe—telling Lamont in the summerhouse Sunday night and beat it down to

the Stokes place to get the Japanese box. That all seems clear enough.

“Well, things seemed to be coming my way then. We arrested the Countess and once I had her safe in jail I began to work on her. We had one sweet little session at last, all by our lonesome, and when she learned who I was she gave right up. She knew I had her at my mercy and that so far as she was concerned there was no mercy coming to her. She asked me to let her cash in in her own way and that suited me down to the ground. She was scared to face the music; for if she was extradited, she knew a firing-squad would line her up against a wall. She preferred to pass out as ‘Mrs. Saint-Anton’ and I agreed to it if she’d sign a paper, relieving me of all responsibility. I managed it so that the paper she signed was a confession to having killed Radcliffe. That completed the case very happily for me.

“I was so pleased with the way things had turned out that I began to think the luck would hold good if I played another round with Levering and MacMurrough. I wanted to redeem myself and show those two crooks that they couldn’t get away with it with me on the job. By this time I was pretty sure Levering was Alceste himself. Then when Thompson turned out to be a Scotland Yard man and had the tip on where they were hanging out, I was sure I had them where I wanted them. With them out of the way I could close the book on the past altogether and go on as Bob Fargey without fear of future trouble.

"You know what happened to-night. We got Mac-Murrough; but Alceste escaped. I made my big mistake when I horned in on the roundup. I should have laid low and let somebody else get the credit of the capture; but I thought if I could pull it off it might satisfy even you, Kent, that I was on the level. Alceste aint going to rest till he gets me for going after them; I aint going to be surprised if he follows me here and tries to get me before morning.

"If neither you nor him shows up and I come through the night, I've got one chance left—to get Alceste before he gets me. I've got every exit from the country blocked from Headquarters and on the lookout for him. His description has been wired everywhere. But I have a hunch it aint any use, that sort of thing, where he is concerned. He'll find a way of his own for beating the whole machine.

"If the game's up, I'm satisfied to leave Alceste to you. If anybody can get that devil, Kent, it is you. I warn you against him. He is the most dangerous crook I've ever known and the cleverest. If I don't find Satan at home when I call, it will be because he's still on earth and has got away from you.

"There's only one favor I have to ask and you may think it funny for me to ask it. But the name of Lieutenant Bob Fargey is clean, old man, and I have a great hankering to leave it clean. It is the one good part of my life—this that I have lived as a respectable citizen of the United States. I am well thought of at the Central Office. I am known all over the country and my stand-

ing in the Force is ace high. You can help to keep it so if you will allow the Radcliffe case to ride as it is. Nobody at Headquarters, in the newspaper offices, or the public at large—will fail to accept the case as solved by the suicide and “confession” of the wicked woman who has been responsible for my downfall. The facts herein set down are known only to you and Traynor—and Alceste.

“If you can let me have a first-class funeral it is all I ask. I would like lots of flowers—as many as possible—and as many bands as you like—the more the merrier. Pick out the finest casket you can get; there will be money enough for a tip-top funeral. I am enclosing a list of the lodges to which I belong and no doubt they will all want to march as well as the boys on the Force, of course. I have written out some dope for the newspapers and perhaps Traynor will be good enough to see to this end of it and get good big type into the headings.

“I enclose also a signed statement to account for my suicide to the public—worry over the state of my health—incurable disease and so on. It should fill the bill all right.

“That’s all—except that I have a hunch this Alceste is a German secret-service agent as well as a jewel thief and that he had two objects in coming to the United States. One of these was to pick up a few choice jewels; the other was to carry out the death penalty decreed by the *Wilhelmstrasse* against the Countess Marinelli. I happen to be the goat who served his ends. If I find that as a spirit I’m able to help you get Alceste, in the interests of humanity you can count on me!

"Well, boys, so long, both of you! I hear an auto coming—somebody hitting the high spots. It may be you. If so—I'm ready. Well, so long and good luck!

Your former friend,

DERMOD O'CARROL,

—or, as I prefer it—

ROBERT FARGEY,

Detective-Lieutenant.

Silently Traynor shuffled the last sheet of foolscap into its place and handed back the document to Addison Kent with a shake of the head.

"Poor Bob!" he murmured.

Kent slid the papers back into the envelope and put it into an inside pocket.

"It is not for us to stand in judgment, Tommy. If only we could have prevented this!" For a moment he stood, looking down at the inert form. "We can at least see that he has his big funeral," he said quietly.

With a sigh he turned away to the telephone on the wall at the head of the bed to notify Police Headquarters.

Then the receiver of the instrument jerked from his hand as he started at Traynor's excited shout behind him.

"Kent! Quick! He's still alive!"

In one bound Kent reached the table. He placed his ear over the heart and straightened up, his face pale, his eyes alert. They lifted him over to the bed and Kent sprang to the telephone.

"Give me the nearest hospital. Quick!"

CHAPTER XXIX

THE GAUNTLET

TRAYNOR tossed his hat onto the desk and felt for a cigar as he dropped into the nearest chair.

"How's the arm coming along?" he asked cheerfully.

"Fine, thanks," smiled Kent through a cloud of tobacco smoke.

"Anything new?"

"Not a thing. It looks as if the beggar has got clean out of the country. Headquarters has been everlastingly busy the past three days but everything they've followed up has failed to give a trace of Alceste."

"And Fargey?"

"Doing nicely. They tell me we can see him for a little while this afternoon. I've ordered the car. How are things at Hillcrest?"

"Rose is very happy with her mother, Ad. And she—I never saw anyone respond so quickly to a change as Mrs. Radcliffe has. She's actually got color in her cheeks."

"I am glad to hear that," nodded Kent with pleasure. "I suppose our friend, Lamont—"

"Oh, the Boss is out there half his time," laughed Tommy. "I never see him now without a flower in his

lapel and I am getting suspicious that he is putting his hair up in curlers at night! What a strange ending this whole thing has come to!"

A shadow crossed Addison Kent's face. His jaws knotted for a moment.

"The ending has not been reached—yet," he said grimly. "The end will never be reached—until we have Alceste behind the bars. I feel that I have failed, Tommy,—failed miserably!"

"You're crazy!" cried Traynor, surprised at the despondency in his friend's voice. "Buck up! How can you say a thing like that? Isn't it something to have brought happiness to Rose and her mother—happiness out of tragedy? That was your work—"

"It might have evolved without assistance from me."

"What's the matter with you? You ran the mystery right out of the case. Fargey got away with nothing."

"Fargey was but a pawn in the game, Tommy. The real criminal has escaped. Has Lamont got back his jewels?"

"What're a few jewels? Nobody cares whether they are recovered or not! At least, neither Rose nor Lamont is worrying over it and I know darn well I'm not. We're concerned with other things more important. Rose and I are to be married—after a bit. So congratulate me, old scout."

"I do, indeed, Tommy," smiled Kent as he reached out and shook hands. He dropped back with a return of his despondency. "Nevertheless, I wish—Don't you see that Alceste has played with us at his own sweet

will—all of us? Is he to get away Scot free? Apparently so. Even the definite tip that brought things to a head—came from Alceste—that note about O'Carrol's whereabouts."

"But you knew it was Fargey. What made you suspect him, Ad? Frankly, it was the surprise of my life."

Kent smoked in silence for a while before he replied.

"Not any one definite thing but a number of things, taken in conjunction with one another," he said thoughtfully at last. "His absolute certainty that 'Mrs. Saint-Anton' was the criminal—even before the shirt-cuff was found—was out of keeping with the evidence to justify it. His refusal to admit any other hypothesis and his manner when he made out his case against her indicated to me a degree of animosity which pointed to something outside his official position in the case. Then at the inquest the sudden complacency which he exhibited, following the disappearance of the pearls, struck me as strange. His excitement over the arrest of the woman and the manner in which he seemed to gloat over it set me wondering. The way the shirt-cuff came to light so suddenly in a trunk that should not have been overlooked in the first place and the wording of the message itself—pointed to a frame-up of some sort.

"Then there was the 'ghost' phase of the case—so outré and unusual that one would naturally have expected the keenest investigation of its significance. Yet Fargey paid scarcely any attention to it—compared to the other evidence—and he even was anxious for you and Levering to help him keep it out of the newspapers.

He was afraid of uncovering something that would upset his case against 'Mrs. Saint-Anton', I gathered; certainly he had no justification for his assumption that she must be the one who played the part of the 'ghost.'

"Meanwhile, my own investigations led me afield to the discovery of Mrs. Stanton's participation in events on the night of the murder and a strong suspicion of Levering's complicity in the crime. I began to wonder if he might not be Alceste himself, even as I suspected that Mrs. Radcliffe was still alive. Then followed the discovery of the chess-cipher message to Levering, introducing an unknown quantity—O. C. I was sure O'Carrol was our man as soon as I heard Mrs. Radcliffe's story of the night at the Château du Vicux Pont and that it was the woman he intended to shoot, not Mr. Radcliffe.

"Then came the suicide of Fargey's prisoner and her 'confession'. I felt sure that something was amiss. I could not square this development with all the facts. I began to wonder about Fargey—to wonder if he was in league with the gang somehow. I got Donovan to help me quietly to look him up and discovered a few interesting things about him; among these was the fact that on the night of the murder Fargey did not reach home until four o'clock in the morning and was off duty at the time. Where had he been? I recalled that you were startled by sight of the moonlight on his face when he and Lamont stepped into your room from the fire-escape; if any significance attached to that incident, it must have been Fargey's face you saw because Lamont's status was

established clearly enough by now. I at once asked myself if Fargey could be O'Carrol and could find no good reason for refuting the possibility. It fitted from every angle.

"I was not sure of it until I watched him at work during the raid on MacMurrough's place. I felt then that he was in desperate straits and surmised what afterwards proved to be the fact—that he was seeking to save himself by a *coup de maitre*. I believe now, though, that Bob was merely playing for a show of weakness from Alceste—that, as he said, he was only bluffing and had no intention of shooting the man on the bed. Anyway—"

He paused as a knock came on the door and the afternoon's mail was flopped in on the hall floor. Traynor stepped out and picked up the letters.

"Anyway, it didn't take Alceste long to strike at Fargey through me, did it?" Kent shuffled the letters and sliced one open. "He is the most unscrupulous, cold-blooded, daring—What the devil now!"

As he read the letter a glint of anger came into his eyes. His cheeks flushed and at last he hit the desk a resounding thump with his good fist and jumped to his feet.

"Read it, Tommy. By the Eternal! did you ever see such gall?"

Traynor began to laugh. It was a simple little farewell note from Alceste, no less, postmarked from a little town up-state and written on parlor-car stationery with the words "En Route" printed at the top:

"Addison Kent,
Minaki Annex,
New York City.

My Dear Kent:—

By the time you get this I'll be out of reach. I regret that pressure of business compelled me to cut short my visit; but I hope that some day I may enjoy your further acquaintance. You stimulate me and I know that I shall miss you.

You have given me the run of my life, old top. In terms of chess, shall we call it 'Stalemate' rather than 'Checkmate?' Some other day we may play another game perhaps? *Quien sabe?*

I am sorry that I could not remain to attend Lieutenant Fargey's funeral. I am sure it must have been an imposing sight. However, I have ordered some flowers sent. I am solacing myself with the hope that some day I may have the pleasure of attending yours.

Auf Wiedersehn, my dear Kent,
ROGER LEVERING (Pro Tempore)
but always your own
ALCESTE."

Kent turned from the window, slapped Traynor's hat on that grinning individual's head and picked up his own.

"Our taxi is waiting. Come on. Let's go and show it to Fargey. It ought to help him to get well."

They found the lieutenant waiting anxiously to see them. Traynor experienced a stab of pity at the tense eagerness with which he tried to read their faces as they entered the private room where he lay. It was his all that was at stake. His head was bandaged and it was something of a shock to see him so white and weak from loss of blood. He smiled faintly when he read the letter from Alceste.

"Aint that guy the limit?" he commented.

Kent drew a chair alongside the bed, reached into his pocket and took out the envelope that contained the closely written sheets of foolscap.

"You will want to know what I intend to do about this, Fargey," he began at once. "That is easily demonstrated." He began to tear it up deliberately into little pieces and put them into his pocket. "As soon as I get home I intend to burn these scraps to ashes—personally."

"You—" He could not articulate for a little while but watched the tearing process with fascination. "You are going to give me—another chance?" he whispered at last in disbelief.

"All the chance in the world, old man."

"I—don't deserve it, Kent," he faltered. "I can only promise you that you'll never find me doin' anythin' to make you regret it. I—I've been a damned fool! I—"

"You are entitled to your own opinion, of course," smiled Kent. "None of us is perfect, you know, and a lesson well learned is usefulness multiplied." He took his hand gently. "You've had a bad dream, as you said yourself, and the best thing to do about bad dreams is to forget them as soon as possible. I feel that your greatest service is yet to be done. There is still—Alceste!"

He stood up.

"That's right, Bob. We need you on the job, you know," grinned Traynor cheerfully as he shook hands.

Lieutenant Fargey could not speak. The hot tears were welling from his eyes. But he raised his hand weakly—at salute.

They left him so.

THE END

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